

CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

2

~A Sign-on-the-Line
Wedding Story~



Author: *Tsuredurebana*

Illustrator: *Rin Hagiwara*

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A black and white manga-style illustration of a young man and woman. The man, Cercis, is on the left, wearing a dark suit and tie, looking towards the viewer with a slight smile. The woman, Viola, is on the right, wearing a dark, strapless dress with lace detailing and a necklace, looking towards the viewer with a slight smile. They are standing in front of a large, ornate building with many windows. To the right of the characters are large, stylized tulips. The background is a light, hazy sky.

MAIN CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

CERCIS

The head of the prestigious Fisalis family and a real looker. A capable worker, but basically useless at home. He has *finally* broken things off with Calendula, but struggles to convey his feelings to Viola.

VIOLA

A young lady from the noble but poor Euphorbia family. She is bright and optimistic, even in the face of her family's dilemma. Not one to sit around, she is a woman of her word set out to change the Fisalis family.



IRIS

The daughter of Marquis Sanguineah. Often wears cute, frilly clothes that do not always complement her elegant, ladylike features. On the hunt for a husband.

CORYDALIS

The lieutenant commander serving under Cercis, who might like Cercis more than he likes him. Holds a high position among his peers, but is easily influenced by those around him.

ROHTAS

The cool-headed, mild-mannered Fisalis family butler. Just don't make him angry.

DAHLIA

The head maid. She oversees the goings-on in the manor with Rohtas.

MIMOSA

Viola's personal maid. She never gets tired of dressing up or making over her mistress.

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Prologue: Recollections from Rohtas

“I hate to say it, but I’m getting married.”

I—the Fisalis family butler, Rohtas—had been called into my master’s long-unused study. No sooner had I poked my head through the doorway than I was met with those words that I never, ever thought I would hear.

My master is Duke Cercis Tinensis Fisalis, a premier duke of the Flür Kingdom and the young head of the great Fisalis family. He had just told me that he was going to be wed, despite having turned down multiple fine candidates proposed by his own father and peers.

At this point, however, he was harboring his lover in an outbuilding on our garden grounds, and not only that, but he was living there himself.

One Miss Calendula, a dancing girl, was the lover in question. I am not certain how or where they first met, but she had her claws in him almost immediately and by the time I noticed, she had settled into her new role as his lover.

From then on, Master was a changed man—but changed for the worse.

He continued to take his work seriously, but threw all other responsibilities to the wayside, particularly those pertaining to his noble status.

It felt like a family crisis then. Meeting her, not only a mere vagrant dancing girl but also one of unknown origin, turned him into a spineless fool.

It would have been fine if they had brought out the best in each other, but if anything, all they did was make each other worse. Marriage, therefore, was out of the question.

A turbulent sea of opposition surrounded them, as well.

Master’s parents, relatives, and even His Majesty the King appeared to disapprove of their relationship. Naturally, all of the servants were opposed to their union, too.

Master, taking advantage of the hustle and bustle around his parents’

retirement to the territory, thereupon moved Miss Calendula into the outbuilding.

It had already been five years since that day.

Despite it having been so long that even we servants had given up hope, and without any sign that the two of them were breaking up, Master suddenly announced that he was getting married. Unable to believe the news, I was compelled to confirm it for myself.

“To your companion in the outbuilding?”

‘Companion.’ That’s what we called his lover. We simply did not want to acknowledge her as a lover or girlfriend, in our minds.

“If that were possible, we’d be long since married by now! No one would allow it, though,” Master answered, somewhat irritably.

Oh, really? They did not want you to marry her, did they?

Hearing him say so made me sigh in relief.

“You are correct about that, Master. So you intend to separate from her, then?” I asked, perhaps too straightforwardly.

“No! That’s not what I meant at all. It would just be a sham marriage so that I could continue living with Callie just as I have been. My bride is going to be Earl Euphorbia’s daughter. Oh, and Callie does know about it, so that’s not going to be a problem,” Master said, his tone suddenly changing at the end. *Sir, you are aware that you just announced plans to cheat on both of these women, correct?*

There was no denying that what he had just uttered was absolutely diabolical.

What a shame. Oh, Master, you’ve grown from such a naïve little boy into an absolute fiend!

...Well, to quite be honest, what he grew into was not my concern, but that was neither here nor there.

“I see,” I answered particularly flatly as I held back my desire to call him a bratty little imp.

“I told her that instead of betrothal money, I would take on her family’s debt;

so to that end, I leave the arrangements to you.”

I understood his statement to mean that Miss Euphorbia had consented to him keeping a mistress as a reward for him shouldering her debt. No matter how sorry I felt for the poor girl, it was impossible for someone like myself to overturn my master’s decision.

“...as you wish, Master,” I replied with a quiet bow before I left the study.

My research into the family situation of Master’s fiancée and her background revealed that, although they did in fact have an enormous debt on their hands, it was not due to extravagant spending, but rather an attempt to help their starving population during a famine. In truth, it was a rather praiseworthy debt. And in regards to the earl and his family, he was widely said to be a kind soul and his wife a woman of good character; in other words, although they were poor, they had a positive reputation, by-and-large.

They had three children, including Miss Viola Mangelica, but she almost never went to social gatherings, so information was limited. Even so, there were no rumors that she was interested in another man, nor any nasty stories about her floating around, so I could find no issue with her.

Being under the impression that Miss Viola had not even met Master, it was not hard to imagine her surprise when he appeared out of nowhere with a marriage proposal.

It’s hard to believe she agreed to such fiendish terms, all to rid her family of their debt. What a noble young lady...

The girl who came to the manor after the wedding ceremony did not seem to bear nearly enough resolve to hold my master’s keeping a lover against him; instead, she was bright and lovely, albeit perhaps set in her ways.

There was not a drop of pessimism to be seen in her regarding the position that had been thrust upon her, and in fact, to the relief of us servants, she seemed to very much enjoy her new circumstances.

She redecorated the manor, did the cleaning and the washing with the servants, and weeded the garden as if she were the gardener. She was quite unlike any other noble, and upon realizing that I could do nothing to change her

cheerful and friendly nature, I gave in. We servants were having a wonderful time, though.

While Madam reinvigorated the manor simply with her presence, I, in turn, made a project out of her.

I could not be too careful; seeing as she was a duchess, we never knew when she might be dragged out to some social event. I instructed her in dance, and her maid Mimosa made her sparkle inside and out through beauty treatments and cosmetics.

It seemed that, until then, she had not had the time to take care of herself—although she still managed to give the impression of sophistication since she possessed a kind of natural beauty—so once she was properly looked after, she quickly blossomed into a truly lovely flower.

“Madam is simply a diamond in the rough! She’s certainly worth the elbow grease!” Mimosa frequently asserted. And goodness, did we ever give it our all polishing that little diamond!

I could see the fruit of my laborious dance lessons, too: her day-to-day movements slowly became more refined and graceful. She did not notice it herself, but she certainly had become a flawless lady in every regard!

Her strawberry blonde locks were so glossy, that it was almost a travesty to not allow them to hang loose around her face. Her pale, smooth skin shone like glass. Her slender, elegant frame looked stunning no matter what she wore.

She had become such a thing of beauty that one might have easily mistaken her for a queen.

We servants were completely enchanted by her as we watched her make her way around the manor, her sapphire blue eyes sparkling.

“It’s because I’m having such a good time cleaning and doing the laundry with you all, and chatting with you while I eat dinner.”

...now as much as before, she loved being with the servants. That, too, was amusing.

Madam's arrival made the manor warm and bright, and Master noticed when the servants began to take pride in their work.

"The house has really changed since Viola came here!"

Little by little he had begun to come to the main house after work, the same place he had once barely acknowledged!

If I'm honest, the manor only feels so pleasant because we all came together under Madam in Master's absence.

Dear me, I shouldn't say something like that out loud.

When Madam was unwell, he came home with medicine from the Royal Palace; when there was a soiree to attend, he bought her a new dress and jewels—it was apparent that he was a changed man, through and through.

I realized for the first time that Master was a very diligent person.

I could not hide my surprise at this transformation, but when I thought about it, I determined that his transformation was a good sign.

I decided it was better that he dote on his legal wife than obsess over his companion. The amount of time he spent at the main house steadily increased as he endeavored to see her as often as possible.

Looking at it objectively, this was around the time I sensed that Master was beginning to develop feelings for Madam, little by little.

To no one's surprise, Master's companion complained. To which Master would give a noncommittal answer, like a thoughtless oaf.

No, like some fiend.

The arguing between Master and his companion was none of my concern, but harming Madam was something I would not tolerate.

"I've come to see the madam, so let her know I'm here, will you?" the companion ordered, looking down her nose at us, all the while never noticing Madam hidden behind the servants.

"This is a private affair, so please make your way out," I told her, as Dahlia, the other servants, and I stood in front of her, blocking her entry.

“Is there going to be a fight next time?” Madam asked, as if she very much wished to join the fray should it come to that.

Your excitement is written all over your face! Just be quiet and let me protect you for now.

Master’s companion successfully pulled off several surprise attacks on the main house, but ultimately it came down to a direct confrontation with Madam.

It was there that Master announced that he would break up with Miss Calendula, having taken Madam as his new object of desire, but the tables were turned when Miss Calendula rejected *him* instead.

It seemed he hadn’t anticipated that reaction, and could only stare back at her in shock.

“You didn’t care what anyone else thought... that’s what I liked about you. You pathetic man. I’m all too happy to give you away to your wife!”

“Nooo, no, no, no!”

And yet, we discovered that even Master’s actual wife did not return his feelings for her. To add insult to injury, she even ended up giving him a pep talk.

You reap what you sow, Master.

I had no words of support for him as he stood there, frozen and dumbfounded.

But then again, it seems as though he has made the choice to treasure his wife and devote himself to her now.

This, too, is a good sign.

Madam is very much a goddess come to help us all—not just the manor, but Master, too.

We shall do our utmost for Master so that Madam does not leave him.

For heaven’s sake, please annul that blasted contract and just become a real couple already!

1 — In Negotiation!

“Cohabitation,” “Removal of the Show Wife Clause,” “Prohibition of Lovers Other Than Mr. Fisalis”—a selection of highlights, brought to you by Mr. Fisalis, from the new marriage contract.

Am I the only one thinking that this is going beyond mere revision and into the realm of starting overing from scratch? ...but then again, I guess it doesn't matter either way.

As far as I'm concerned, my main worry—my family's debt—has already been settled with the betrothal money, so I don't have any issues with it as far as that goes.

More importantly, Mr. Fisalis added something else.

“About socializing... since I'm only making you do the minimum necessary, I hope we'll be able to keep doing business with each other ≡”

I see he's planning ahead for my 'optional events'! Dang it, he even included an entire “options” clause! ...er, oops. I'm ranting again.

“Understood,” I replied as calmly as I could, concealing my undercurrent of annoyance.

Apparently unaware of my inner turmoil, Mr. Fisalis smiled in satisfaction and nodded at my response.

“Well, that's good enough from me. We can talk about issues when they arise.”

“Sounds fine.” I nodded back in resignation.

“Is there anything you'd like to add?” Mr. Fisalis had unexpectedly asked for my opinion.

“Terms and conditions that I want?” I cocked my head in confusion. It hadn't occurred to me that I could ask for those.

Mr. Fisalis answered with a faint smile, “Exactly. It's unfair to you if I'm the

only one setting them. Honestly, what I want the most is for you to stand by my side, like a normal couple, without this contract business.”

He stuttered out his attempt at romance with his typical naïve optimism, only for me to ignore it. His shoulders drooped when I didn’t respond the way he’d hoped, but I continued on as if I didn’t notice that either.

A term? That I want? There can only be one, then. If he wants us to be together every day from now on, that means he’s going to want us to eat together, too.

My stomach couldn’t handle mountains of gourmet foods, and since I would rather not live everyday in fear of intestinal terrorism, I answered after a moment of consideration: “...In that case, I have some concerns about mealtime.”

Now it was Mr. Fisalis who looked puzzled when I suddenly brought up meals.

“Our meals? Are they not to your satisfaction?” he asked with raised brows.

Yikes, his eyes turned scary! He wrongly suspects Cartham again, just like when I got fancy food poisoning!

“Nooo, no, no! Don’t be silly, there’s nothing unsatisfactory about the food! In fact, it’s too good! It actually kind of shocks my digestive system, ah ha ha.” I denied in a panic over Mr. Fisalis’ misunderstanding, but alas, I let too much slip.

“It’s *too* good?” he frowned in suspicion at my slip of the tongue.

“No—er, well, there’s more than enough of it. It’s just that the portions are too big for me. Especially at breakfast! It’s more than I could ever eat. It’s a total waste.”

“Breakfast, you say?”

“Yes. The portions seem much too large for a single serving. There’s no way I could finish all of it, and even if I somehow managed to, it would make me sick again.”

I had no complaints about dinner, though. *My stomach has plenty of time to get to work after I eat breakfast and lunch, so I should be able to handle half-*

size portions.

It's breakfast that's the problem. In terms of both volume and quality, the two of them first thing in the morning basically spell certain death for my half-asleep stomach. Those breakfasts will be the death of me before I even have a chance to get used to living like this!

Mr. Fisalis seemed surprised by my claim.

"It won't happen again! I understand now. You have a poor appetite."

He absolutely overreacted when I said it would make me sick.

He leaned forward.

How do I put this in a way you can understand?

It's not so much that I have a poor appetite as it is that my poor stomach can't deal with anything richer than simple food.

Oh well. I wouldn't dare say that out loud.

I needed to come up with something to get him to move away from me.

"So, yes, I'll be having smaller portions from now on. But you..."

"Hm?"

"Do you really eat that much everyday?" I finally asked what had been on my mind ever since I arrived at the manor.

"Sure—er, no, well... I guess I don't eat all of it."

For someone who wanted to get up close and personal a minute ago, he looked away immediately and avoided giving a straight answer.

"You had the regular bread, soup, salad, and entrée when your father was here, though, right?"

"Yeah. The menu is always the same and prepared ahead of time when my parents are here. The dishes always go well together."

"Rohtas told me that when you waste food, acting like your taste changes every day, that a green giant will put a curse on you!"

I li-ter-al-ly can't believe that this man wouldn't clean his plate!

“What?”

My sudden exposition about a certain jolly green giant caught Mr. Fisalis off guard.

Looks like someone hasn't heard of the giant! Heh heh, I'll have to give him a thorough explanation!

“The jolly green giant is the physical embodiment of all the little spirits of the food that gets thrown out. So, if you waste food, he'll appear at your bedside at night and whisper ‘what a waaaste, what a waaaste...’

[edited for brevity]

And that's why you should always clean your plate!”

“...Understood.” He drew away from me with an awkward grimace, but did I care? No, I did not.

“Alright, good. Now then, what shall we do about dinner?”

“Let's see... I'll have whatever you're having. I've been worried sick about you ever since you fell ill that morning. Even more so than I am about green giants,” he answered after a moment of thought, as he rested his chin on his fist.

Unfortunately it looked as though my giant story had gone over his head.

Grrr! Oh well, so long as they stop giving me all that fancy food!

“Oh, thank you. I'll let Cartham know, then.” My stomach marked itself safe for the time being.

“Okay. Is there anything else?” he gently pressed for more.

Typical me. I was very satisfied to have a good time chatting with the servants and working around the manor, so nothing else came to mind.

Oh, 'I get stressed out when you come to the main house after work'? LOL. I can't say that!

“Anything else... no, nothing in particular right now. But if something comes up, like you said, we can discuss it when it does.”

“Okay,” he replied, thus completing the renewal of our contract without incident (?).

Mr. Fisalis had dinner with me in the main house, but afterwards, as I chased him away—I mean, showed him out—I politely told him, “I hope you learned a valuable lesson tonight when your girlfriend broke up with you.”

Miss Calendula.

I wonder if we could have been friends, if we hadn't met this way.

Be sure to get in touch if you're ever back in Rozhe!

2 — A New Normal

Several days after the sudden renewal of our contract (itself following directly on the heels of the chaotic battle (?) with Calendula):

Calendula had gotten her affairs in order, and the day when she would leave had finally arrived.

Just moments before, Rohtas had forced Mr. Fisalis out the door and on his way to work as the latter grumbled to the former, “I just want to see her off!” And the former insisted, “Please just go, Master! I do not know when she plans to depart, and lateness is strictly prohibited!”

I lined up with Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa on the carriage porch to see Calendula off in the modest coach Mr. Fisalis had prepared.

Apparently it was her idea in the first place to leave when he wasn’t around.

“I’m indebted to you for looking after me, Madam. Oh, wait, no I’m not. You just messed everything up!” she snickered. She wasn’t wearing any of the glamorous dresses I was accustomed to seeing her in, but a plain, body-hugging crimson dress.

It’s so unfair... she gets to look sexy even when she’s getting the boot. I guess that’s her natural advantage.

“Oh, not at all... I mean, yes, er, sorry?”

“Hmph. Seems I overstayed my welcome—but then again, what was I thinking, sticking around this long? Going somewhere new is always exciting anyway! You can’t beat this weather, either. It’s like a gift for my new life ahead!” she said, looking up at the cloudless sky with her ruby red eyes. In stark contrast to her confident words, however, she was holding back tears.

“What will you do now?” I asked.

“Go back to being a dancing girl, same as I was before. I’ll manage. I’m over this quiet life, so maybe I’ll spice things up and head to the south. The cold of

the northern countries doesn't suit me, anyway," Calendula replied.

As someone who was originally a traveling dancing girl, her job history would suggest that she doesn't stay in one place for long, hopping from tavern to tavern.

I've certainly never led a life like hers, so naturally I'm more than a little worried for her!

"Do you have any money, or have a place to live planned out? Are you sure you'll be alright?" I asked.

As if seeing right through my anxiousness, she answered with a glance at her scant luggage already loaded in the carriage. "I can get some good money for these expensive dresses he bought me, and I have plenty of jewelry, too. So long as I have the means, I'll find a way. I'll be fine."

She only had three trunks, barely anything at all.

All the same, though, what a clever woman! Sell off the bulky dresses first, and then the jewelry later as needed. And she kept her luggage to a minimum, too! Traveling is nothing new to her, for sure!

"I should get going. Give my regards to Cercis, Madam."

"Huh!?"

"For Pete's sake... are you pretending to be dumb, or is that just how you normally are? Either way, you never failed to amuse me."

"Erm, no, it's... glad I could be of service."

"You really don't think much of him, do ya?"

"Uh, hmmm... not really? Then again, I'm not really that sure, considering we haven't been together for very long. I didn't even know what he looked like, to start with, and then what with his position in court, we had no real relationship. And besides, even when I did come to care about him a little bit, he already had a mistress, so what was the point?"

There I go, blabbering like a dummy again after Miss Calendula only says a few words about him.

“Ha ha ha! I like straightforward people. Ah, jeez. I know how he seems, but I always thought Cercis was adorable,” Calendula quipped, her eyes darkening slightly.

Oh, I see, now. He was a cute and innocent boytoy.

“He certainly is.”

“He’s a real dummy sometimes, but more often than that, he’s wonderful. Finding that out was one of my favorite moments.”

“What if it’s too hard, and I can’t build a relationship with him?”

“Pfft! You’ll do fine! I’m sure you’ll be able to find all of the nice things about him! You’re such a strange girl, for real... Even someone as indifferent as Cercis would care about a good, sweet girl like you.”

“Huh?”

Did she say something after she called me strange? I couldn’t hear her very well.

“Don’t worry about it! He’s all yours now, *Madam!*”

“If you’re ever back in the capital, please do drop by!”

“...Good grief, are you ever *not* nice!?” Calendula said, ruby eyes smiling. She closed them once, and when they opened again, they had regained that determined glint. “This was quite the chat. I’m going now. Take care.”



“Same to you, Miss Calendula!” I waved lightly as she got into the carriage and it pulled away.

“We never had anything to do with each other, so I can’t say I’ll miss her.” I admitted out loud as I absentmindedly watched the carriage disappear.

“Same for me. I never associated with her either. I only knew her as that companion my friends who looked after her always talked about,” Mimosa said from where she was waiting a half step behind me.

“At long last, the manor has returned to its proper state.” Dahlia said briefly, to which Rohtas nodded in agreement.

A blue sky, like a gift in honor of a new life.

I had a feeling she could make it anywhere she went.

As they say, when one person leaves, someone else arrives.

After that, we made quick work of bringing Mr. Fisalis’ things from the outbuilding into the main house.

When I say things, I mean clothes, books, and paperwork. He didn’t have any personal furniture or the like in the outbuilding.

Dahlia took over the boxes and bags we brought in, promptly storing them away in the study and Mr. Fisalis’ room.

“Yeah... once all of Mr. Fisalis’ things are brought in, it’ll really feel like we’re living together,” I said, as I observed the move from outside in the hall.

We’ll finally be living in the same house.

“For sure. I only attended Master during my first year as an apprentice, so this is effectively a brand new experience for me, too,” Mimosa said with an uneasy smile.

“Oh, really? Ah, well, I’ll only be seeing him in the morning and at night, so that should be fine.”

And I’ll be free to do what I usually do when he’s not here.

That evening:

It was getting close to when Mr. Fisalis ordinarily came home. I changed my clothes as per usual and waited.

He was still right on time.

“Master has returned,” Dahlia came and told me, just as Mimosa had finished doing my hair.

“I’m on my way down.” I stood up and headed to the entryway.

“Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis,” I called out, rushing to the entrance to find him talking to Rohtas there.

There’s nothing new about that, so why does something feel off? I cocked my head, and then suddenly realized what it was.

The entryway was much more densely populated before.

Normally it was just me, Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa, but now Mr. Fisalis’ three personal maids had come to greet him, too, which accounted for the increase.

Mystery solved.

The remaining servants, by the way, always listened carefully and quietly to what was happening in the entrance to find out if we were starting a Cercis Shift, but you never actually saw them! Our servants also possess superior ninja skills.

But since Mr. Fisalis is going to be living here from now on, the Cercis Shift is kind of a moot point, even though everyone’s gotten so good at it.

I’m sort of sorry to see it go.

At any rate, there were seven of us total there to greet him that day.

When Mr. Fisalis spotted me, he called out, “I’m home, Viola!” He then smiled ear-to-ear at me, even though he had been in the middle of a seemingly interesting discussion with Rohtas. It was a broad, genuine smile that lit up his entire face.

He looks so... gleeful, all of a sudden.

On the inside, I was surprised, but I kept my cool on the outside and greeted

him just as usual.

“You’ve had a long day.”

“I see you didn’t wait around to bring my things in. Thanks for seeing Callie off.”

He looked a little sad as he spoke, but being an adult, I let him go.

*

And thus began Mr. Fisalis’ slow but steady infiltration of my everyday life.

It still feels super weird, though.

Speaking of changes, I wonder if my rainy day schedule has seen any updates?

“Huh? We’re going to have tea now?”

I had practically tripped over my own ghost leaving my body after Demon Instructor Rohtas had all but killed me during my dance lesson, when Dahlia cheerfully informed me that it was tea time.

And here I thought his dance lessons had already passed the “experienced” level.

What more does he want from me? Would he want me to “acquire a trade,” as they say? Has he been leading me down the path to becoming a dance instructor myself!? Not to toot my own horn, but I am pretty good at dancing to complicated music now, I guess.

Really, I want to know what the point is...

Er, no, what I want right now is to sit down, not some tea.

Badly. I need a break now.

Like, an afternoon siesta instead of tea.

The corner of my mouth twitched at Dahlia’s announcement, but she seemed to brush it off.

“Yes, in just a moment. Since you’re feeling worn out, how about some sweet

milk tea?" I knew by the way she smiled that she meant "delicious."

Exhausted as I was, however, it was impossible for me to respond like a normal person.

"Woohoo! Yummy milk tea! Your tea is the best, Dahlia!" Hook, line, and sinker.

Allow me to explain.

It was, quite frankly, a trap. There's delicious milk tea. And delicious tea cakes to go with it.

But.

"Here, sit up straight."

"Hold your cup like so."

"Don't let it clink as you set it down."

That's right, this was an etiquette lesson in disguise.

"Dahliaaa, this is another lesson, isn't it?" I protested with a glare.

"Not at all, Madam. This is afternoon tea, nothing more. We're taking a break," she replied with a smile, dropping the strict expression she had worn earlier.

Pants on fire.

"No we're nooot."

Another smile. "One never knows when these manners might be called for. You'll pick them up a little at a time."

She smiled even more.

Hey now, this isn't supposed to be an etiquette lesson!

"But I'm exhaaausted," I said, looking up at Dahlia, all the while thinking that this wouldn't be so bad if I wasn't practically dead on my feet.

"Your real potential shines through when you're at your weakest." She slammed the door shut on my attempts to resist.

"Hmgh." There was nothing I could say to win *that* argument.

Then again, it's not like I had any chance of beating someone like Dahlia from the get-go.

Now that I had been thoroughly dunked on, Dahlia poured me another cup of tea.

"Now, now, don't be like that. You'll master these little habits in no time, I'm sure, Madam. Thanks to Rohtas' dancing lessons, you've acquired more elegant mannerisms, so perfecting your etiquette will only add to that air of elegance."

Confused as I was by this sudden flattery, I could only respond with, "Uh, what? Y-you really think so?" I naïvely took her words at face value.

"I most certainly do! Which is why we must do our absolute best! Oh, yes, that reminds me. A short while ago I received word from Rohtas—he said that Mr. Fisalis is uncommonly busy at work today and will be home later than usual."

The old carrot and stick routine. Dangling a reward in front of me to make me work harder. Touché.

"Oh!? You mean I can eat dinner with you all tonight!?"

"Correct."

"Oh, goodie! I've missed having my servants' meal!"

It's been so long since I last got to chat with everyone while I ate! Just thinking of it had my heart leaping in excitement.

"Well then, let's keep going a little while longer, shall we?" Dahlia prompted with a smile when she saw how excited I was for a servants' meal.

"Yeah! I shall endure!" I exclaimed in high spirits.

...I guess I'm what they call food-motivated.

For that reason—in order to set my sights even higher—in addition to my dance lessons with Demon Instructor Rohtas, rainy days also now meant lessons in proper etiquette for ladies, like table manners.

3 — Your Job is to Socialize

Mr. Fisalis started returning to the main house after work, the number of people there to greet him grew, and the Cercis Shift had slowly become normal, everyday practice.

“We’ve received an invitation to a party,” he said as soon as he got home one day, handing me a white envelope.

Oh no, what’s with this feeling of déjà vu?

I took the envelope from him and turned it over to see if the crest belonged to you-know-who again, cheek already twitching.

It was not the royal crest pressed into the sealing wax on the back, but a different one, belonging to another well-known family.

Smiling at my reaction to the wax seal, Mr. Fisalis explained, “It’s not from the Royal Palace this time. It’s from the Argenteia family.”

“The Argenteias?” I craned my neck to look up at him and blinked.

The Argenteias were the most prestigious family in the kingdom after the Fisalises. Naturally, since they were all elite aristocrats, they were practically gods compared to my own impoverished family.

“That’s right. I told them you weren’t good with socializing, but we can’t refuse them now. They’ve been friends with my family for a long time, and their sons are my old childhood friends. Do it for me?” Mr. Fisalis asked me with a slight frown.

Oh, that reminds me of what Dahlia said. Before he met Calendula, he often played escort to Miss Verbena.

“I see. Alright, I will.” Even I couldn’t refuse, given the circumstances.

That doesn’t mean I’m thrilled about it, though.

Mr. Fisalis’ radiant smile reappeared in relief when he saw me nod in agreement.

“Thank you. The soiree is in two weeks. Oh, you’ll need a new dress, won’t you?”

“Er, sure?” My eyes flew open wide at how easily the statement rolled off his tongue. Funds were clearly not an issue.

Here he goes again, wasting more money!

I still have piles of dresses I haven’t worn (and that’s no exaggeration!), and I haven’t worn my last party dress even once since then.

Can’t I just alter one I already have?

Some other wealthy girl might be thrilled to get an expensive dress, but I, true to form, would not be. *Buying expensive things embarrasses me, and besides, I prefer to use my favorite things meaningfully.*

It doesn’t seem like that message has gotten through to Mr. Fisalis.

“I’ll ask for Madame, again. What color should we go with this time?” he asked, his eagerness to buy me a new dress in total opposition to my desire to save money.

He’s got some crazy idea; I can see it in his absentminded smile. He had better not be thinking of matching outfits again! I flat out refuse to look like one of those painfully awkward couples!

“Stopstopstopstop. Could you pleeease wait a minute?” I said, trying to put a halt on things. I got the feeling he had already taken it upon himself to have a chat with Madame.

“What is it?”

“I have tons of new dresses already, and I’ve even still got one that was made for that earlier party.”

“I can’t have you wear a dress you’ve already worn once! And the dresses that you have here are your everyday clothes. They’re just dresses that were rushed out when you married into the family, so some of them might not even be to your liking. Now, she can make a dress that suits you—one that accentuates your beauty!” he declared, his smiling eyes turning serious. Silk, chiffon, antique lace—I was nearly moved to tears by the veritable canyon

between our values that enabled him to declare that dresses so lavishly made with these luxury fabrics were *everyday wear*.

And he said it would “accentuate my beauty” but, I guess when I think about it, I’d be the one the dress was accentuating. I mean, that’s obvious.

It seemed unlikely, though, that overexcited Mr. Fisalis would accept my rejection.

“Ugh, but I don’t mind if we alter the dress from the other day,” I protested, growing slightly teary-eyed.

“If you want it altered, I can certainly have that done, but can’t we have one tailor-made for this party? It’ll be a present from me, so there’s no need to feel bad about accepting it.” His expression did a complete one-eighty, his broad smile shining as he flatly rejected me.

Afterwards:

“If he’s giving it to you, you should just take it! Say, Madam. What style do you want it to be this time?” said Mimosa, wriggling her fingers and chuckling like some kind of predator at the mere thought of dressing me up.

“There’s no need to worry about that, Madam, since it will be a gift from Master,” Dahlia intervened, having made me some tea once I had calmed down a little.

“Yeah, I’ll indulge him,” I said, even though I had already started working on altering the dress from before.

Even if I don’t wear it this time around, I’m sure I could get some more use out of it, or I could give it to my sister if she wants it.

The day of the party:

I ended up wearing a subdued violet dress. It was another haute couture masterpiece from the same dressmaker as last time and Mimosa, with a voluminous design to compensate for my flat chest.

This silhouette is all the rage right now: an elegant draping that starts just below the bustline. I’m impressed, Madame!

My necklace featured teardrop-shaped sapphires arranged like flowers,

overlaid with diamond leaves and grasses. Although not complex, it was quite impressive—enough so that I got the shivers just thinking of how much it was worth.

Yeah... Best I don't see the price tag.

I feel transformed into utter perfection, too, thanks to Mimosa and her cheery Spa Squad.

I'm suited up and ready for battle—I mean, the party.

By my side was Mr. Fisalis, who had very much been hoping we'd have a coordinated look, but I went out of my way to avoid that by indecisively mentioning different colors at every opportunity. Despite my efforts, an ascot matching my dress peaked out from under his shirt collar.

See, that's plenty.

He was dressed entirely in dark colors.

"That dress looks simply stunning on you!" he complimented me, flashing a magnificent smile.

"Thank you for having it made for me. It's absolutely wonderful."

"Oh, a dress like this is nothing! I can have her make more if you wa—"

"This one's plenty! I just won't wear it enough. It's not like I plan on going to a lot of parties!"

"Oh?" His disappointment was written clearly across his face... Not that I paid *that* any attention.

"Absolutely! Now, let's get going." I cut the conversation short and prompted Mr. Fisalis to get a move on.

If we'd kept talking, he'd just start on about having more dresses made for me again!

What now? Don't give me that look. Do you want to be left behind?

Duke Argenteia's mansion gave the Fisalis manor a run for its money.

Wowww. I think ours is still bigger, though.

Oh, jeez, what am I doing, acting proud about my house? Let's put that thought back where it came from.

If I were to describe the Fisalis mansion (more like palace!) as a beautiful, verdant garden, then I suppose the Argenteia mansion is like a crystal-blue waterway. The Wahl River ran through the estate grounds, and one of the manor's corridors was even built right over it, giving the whole design an extremely refined feeling.

Mr. Fisalis escorted me inside, where I was greeted by the pleasant sound of laughter spilling out from behind the doors and flowing through the hallways.

It's been so long since my last time out... I'm so nervous!

Don't think like that! You can do it! Your outfit and makeup are on point and Mr. Fisalis is not only here with you, but he looks stellar, too! You have nothing to be scared of! I cheered myself on internally, like my own private battle cry.

After introducing myself to the hosts, Duke and Duchess Argenteia, as well as Mr. Fisalis' old friends and their sons, we made our way towards the site of the party.

This time, I came prepared for other women, turned green with envy, to whisper, "it's her!"

Bring it on! Huh???? What, no, I'm not shaking!

The moment we set foot in the room, everyone's gazes turned towards us in a flash.

You were all so animated and chatty a second ago. Don't just go quiet like that! I was ready for an argument, but not to suddenly become the center of attention! Cut it out, you've got me frozen in fear!

After a moment, however, everyone went back to the way they'd been before, chatting and laughing.

The room was lively, but not raucous, with everyone indulging in conversation, wine, and hors d'oeuvres, which made for an altogether welcoming atmosphere. Looking over the area, I could see that there were a great many people there.

Considering the Argenteias are among the most elite families in the entire kingdom, not only were a whole lot of people invited, but it seems like they all actually showed up, too. The guests aren't limited to a single age bracket, either: young, old, men, women... There seem to be equal numbers of all in attendance.

Though it does look like most of the people dancing are young. *Figures, you need strength to dance.*

I took my time watching them.

As for myself, Mr. Fisalis escorted me around the room as I introduced myself; but, as if to undermine all the work I put in to preparing myself for battle, all I received was: "My my, Duchess Fisalis, you look beautiful tonight. May I have this dance?"

Invitations to dance from gentlemen young and old alike, and:

"Give the men a break and come chat with us!"

Invitations to some private girl-talk from the ladies.

I did not happen to come across any women turning green with envy, either.

How strange. You can always count on trouble at fancy parties in all the popular romance novels.

Oh well. It's better for everyone that we're all friendly.

For the time being, I replied to both invitations with a simple "It would be my pleasure" and forced a little smile as I told myself: *you're a noble. Socializing is your job.*

At that point, Mr. Fisalis and I became separated as I was swept away by a man who had asked for a dance.

I wondered where Mr. Fisalis had disappeared to, so I casually searched for him as I made my rounds and found that he, too, was busy dancing and talking near where we had been separated. Our eyes met several times, and even from that far away, I could see he was concerned about me.

I danced with total concentration, never missing a step or losing the rhythm.

“You are a talented dancer, Duchess,” complimented my gentleman partner.

Please don't talk to me—you'll make me mess up!

“Oh? I thought I was just barely keeping up,” I replied humbly, with a half-heartedly elegant smile. Honestly, though, I was being more honest than humble.

Talking while dancing was a rather high-level skill for me.

Because then I have to concentrate extra hard to make sure this smile I've plastered on my face doesn't slide right off!

“Not at all. Not everyone can dance with this much composure. Your steps and deportment are simply flawless!” my grinning partner said.

I'm so sorry. You've just given me such a nice compliment, but I've completely forgotten your name.

“Thank you for your kind words,” I answered shyly, looking at my feet.

“You must have an amazing dance teacher.”

“Teacher? Oh, more like torturer...”

“Torturer!?”

“Oh, no, I didn't mean that! Just a slip of the tongue, ahahaha! He's a very nice teacher!”

“Oh, I'm sure.”

Caaareful. I almost revealed Demon Instructor Rohtas' true nature to a mere mortal.

Laughing it off, I was able to finish the dance without anymore slip-ups, making small talk all the while.

Mustn't let him see my true nature, either.

As for the girl-talk, it was all women who were around my mother's age, so it was less like bathroom gossip and more like a women's club.

I had only just finished dancing and was still a bit out of breath; however, just as I was about to sit down after being offered a seat, I remembered how

expensive my dress was.

I had better be careful sitting down so I don't wrinkle it! I lightly adjusted my dress with as much care as possible to avoid creases, and gently took a seat.

The conversation picked back up once I'd sat down.

"I hear your estate's garden is exceedingly elegant, Duchess."

"We have a very skilled gardener to thank for that."

"Our gardener specializes in bonsai."

"Oh, how wonderful! What kind?"

"Er, a bit of everything, they're imported..."

Everyone was very friendly, but the conversation was only happening between themselves.

Oh well, I guess this is what they call the generation gap. I'm just not on the same wavelength as them. I like gardening as much as the next girl, but I have yet to feel the urge to grow bonsai! I'm only eighteen, after all! I'm not even sure how to join this conversation.

Why am I here, again?

Tired from the dancing and uninvolved in the conversation, I started to zone out.

I had quietly picked up a glass to quench my dry throat, but I didn't want to be rude and drink right as someone was talking, so I turned away from the others for a covert little sip when: "Your posture is so beautiful, Madam," commended a countess (whose name I could not remember), admiring my movements.

"You really think so?" I could not recall having ever been complimented on that before, and cocked my head in surprise.

"Oh, yes. Everything you do is very refined—not a single wasted movement at all! I ought to have you tutor my daughter!" said a marchioness (name also forgotten) as she nodded excitedly in apparent agreement.

"You've clearly practiced very hard," said another countess.

I don't know whether I'd call it practice or abuse...

No, this time I think it's just random coincidence.

Anyhow, the results of the party:

My "Rainy Day Schedule" proved to be efficient on the whole.

Incredible work, everyone! I'm glad I listened to what the servants said! I'm on your side from here on out!

These were the thoughts running through my head as I nodded along to what one of the ladies was saying, when someone with a clear, penetrating voice like a small bell called my name from behind me.

"Miss Viola! I haven't seen you in a while!"

Where have I heard that voice before?

When I turned around, there was Iris Sanguinneah, whose acquaintance I had made at my last soiree, her almond eyes crinkled in delight.

She was in a fluttery rosy pink dress tonight as well.

The same look as before!

"Oh, Miss Iris. It's good to see you, again! ...Pardon me for a moment, everyone."

I excused myself from the 'women's club' and went over to where Miss Iris was standing.

I couldn't help but think, *my savior has come for me!*

4 — A Convoluted Solution

Having been rescued from the women's club by Miss Iris just when I was starting to accept that I'd be a bystander for that whole conversation, I found myself among the same group of ladies who had included me in their circle at the last party.

Looks like they're all here, too!

I mean, look at me... I'm not here because I actually like going to parties. Obviously I had no idea who was going to be here, but these ladies probably got together and came as a group.

"It's good to see you all." I struggled to match names to faces as the ladies around me smiled elegantly, but thankfully had just enough social skills to not let it show.

It was with great effort that I dug their surnames out from the back of my mind: Earl Krokusse's daughter, Marquis Nastersham's daughter, and one from Earl Columbine's family.

Their first names, on the other hand...

That's okay, brain cells—you gave it your best shot!

"It's been a while since the soiree at the palace, no? I haven't had the pleasure of seeing you since then, Miss Viola, so I was wondering if you'd be here." That's right, the pudgy one was from the Krokusse family.

"The Duke hasn't come to any parties, either..." This one was from the Nastersham family; she rivaled me in lankiness—er, excuse me, in slenderness.

Now that she mentions it, Mr. Fisalis really hasn't gone to any events. He's just been coming straight home.

A better question, ladies, would be: how do you all know we have or haven't been?

"Er, how do you know that?" I inquired, timidly.

“Because we go to nearly all the parties!” they all replied, laughing cheerfully.

Spoken like true aristocrats. Socializing comes as easy as breathing to them.

Guess that makes me substandard.

“You really ought to try going out and meeting people.”

“That’s right! Since you’re already married, you’ve barely gotten to know anyone! That’s no good for us!”

“I figure my parents will look after me if I don’t get married, but I know society thinks of it as a lost opportunity.”

“They all think that if we have any feminine charm, we might as well use it as a political weapon.”

“Yeah!” It seemed they were all on the same page. That is: none of them had fiancées.

It sounded like they had some unrealistic ideas about marriage, too, like still being set on a love match.

They’re like little girls.

Since going to events like this one serves as a way for unmarried men and women to find a partner, I suppose they’ve all got their antennas out and are privy to all sorts of information.

Guess their antennas picked up on the discrepancy between our attendance ratios.

Fighting hard to keep my cheek from twitching, I replied, “Is that so? You sure know a lot, then. Ahahahaha. We can’t go out to events like these very often since Mr. Fisalis is so busy.”

I can’t very well tell them that I despise social events. But I can lie. So I slapped a grin on my face!

Since we were standing around talking, Miss Iris and the others quickly secured some chairs; a proper girls-only meeting was now in session.

“What a stunning dress you’re wearing tonight, Miss Viola! Is it from Madame Fleur’s?”

Miss Iris' guess was right on the money. She was incredibly up-to-date with the latest brands. Madame Fleur was the name of my usual dressmaker—her high-end brand was called Haute Couture de Fleur.

"It is."

"I knew it! Her dresses really make their wearers stand out. But doesn't it take her six months to make each one? It's unfortunate that by the time they arrive, you've forgotten you ordered anything. Forget one season—you've got to order *two* seasons ahead, or else it won't arrive in time," Miss Iris said with a shrug. It seemed she was a patron of Madame Fleur's, too.

Why didn't my dress take six months? It usually gets delivered in two weeks, even... there was no way I could tell them that, though.

Looks like my order really was made a top priority. The Fisalis family name must really pull some weight!

"I've heard that her shop is all the rage right now. It's a privilege to even have something made by her," I told them, holding back much more than I actually said.

"I heard that Madame Fleur was excited to work with you, Miss Viola, since any dress looks beautiful on someone with a body shape and proportions like yours! I'm so envious!" the Krokusse daughter said, seemingly critical of her own body.

Tsk, why did you bring up something so hard to talk about?

I forced myself to smile on the inside, but it didn't make it all the way to my face. *Ugh, socializing!*



“But Miss Krokusse, you have a very feminine figure, and the cute look suits you quite well,” I told her, complimenting her airy, loose-fitting dress.

“Oh my! Thank you...” she said with a blush. She was really quite adorable, and charming, too.

“On the topic of body shape, Miss Nastersham is tall, so I’d think she could pull off any look, too,” I said, looking at the marquis’ daughter.

“Goodness, no. My proportions are terrible and I’m too skinny. I’d like some more curves! Yours are perfect, Miss Viola!” she responded, looking straight at my chest.

Hey, my eyes are up here.

What about this flat chest looks perfect to you? I only look like I have anything there thanks to the efforts of this dress and Mimosa’s magic. It’s just an illusion! It all disappears once I take my dress off!

“You flatter me! Heh heh heh...” I wasn’t very good at giving or receiving compliments in public.

I’m sick of empty compliments. Everyone just takes turns finding something flattering to say about each other!

“I’d like to talk to you at length sometime, Miss Viola, but this isn’t really the right place. You know, about clothes and beauty tips, this and that... tee hee!”

You looked awfully suspicious at the end there, Miss Iris! What do you mean, ‘this and that’? Dare I even ask?

“Oh, I know! Since the duke is so busy and you can’t go to very many evening affairs, why not host a tea party?”

“A... tea party?”

“Yes! You could chat with your friends at leisure and simply have a gay old time!” exclaimed Miss Iris, her eyes glittering.

“Do consider it. We’d all like to be your friends, Miss Viola.”

“I’d quite like to see the duke’s magnificent garden that I hear so much about, too.”

“And since it would be held at your home, it won’t interfere with whatever the duke might have on his schedule!” Now the other ladies had stars in their eyes, too, not just Miss Iris.

What exactly are they expecting? Social events and tea parties are really not my... cup of tea.

But I couldn’t possibly say that.

“At-at my home?”

“Yes!” they responded in unison.

Do they really want to come to the manor that badly?

“...Alright, then. I’ll ask Mr. Fisalis about it.”

I gave in to the pressure of their sparkling eyes, and then went to go search for Mr. Fisalis through the crowded venue.

I ended up spotting him without all that much trouble, however.

Besides being dazzlingly gorgeous, he’s so gosh darn tall! It makes him stand out.

He was by the window where I last saw him, talking with a group of men. I thought it might be hard to get to him, but my desire to go home seemed to be pushing me onward.

Figuring I had no choice, I was already making my way toward him when someone called out, “Are you Duchess Fisalis?”

“Yes, that would be me...?”

When I turned, standing there beside me was the owner of the unknown voice: a young woman whom I had never met.

Is she an aristocrat’s daughter? I don’t think I’ve made her acquaintance, so I haven’t a clue who she might be.

Ignoring the puzzled look on my face, she sneered at me from behind her fluttering fan. “Hmm. You’re just tall... and exceedingly average, too. You’re trying to hide it with that dress and your accessories, but you’re really just a plain-Jane nobody, aren’t you? You think you have a nice figure? Madame’s

dresses would make anyone look beautiful. And ‘a beautiful posture’? I wonder if you’re not just self-conscious about how you move. What is it that they all see in you? I, for one, fail to see anything worth liking in a common girl like yourself. Take off that dress and makeup, and while you’re at it, drop the duchess act, too. No one will miss you, little girl.”

All this while looking me up and down, too!

Somehow, though, I don’t actually feel all that insulted. Everyone looks plain when they’re in casual clothes with no makeup, right? I jabbed back in my head.

That’s the first time anyone ever said I was self-conscious about how I move, though, so that’s a little embarrassing.

Oh! This is it! We’re on the brink of a new plot development!

I managed to dodge any sort of attack at the last party, but this time I’m experiencing it for real! Thank you for the opportunity, Mystery Lady! I’m so stoked! I feel like the heroine in one of those popular novels!

This lady’s been watching me for a while, though! I mean, gosh, even I don’t remember each and every one of the fake compliments I get once I leave the conversation. Could it be something she does in her spare time? I take my hat off to your superior memory, my lady. You perceived my true nature so easily! I am exactly as you said. Thank you for kindly letting me know that I am a common girl with no redeeming qualities.

Of course she’s picking a fight with me, look how pretty she is.

She had large, double-lidded indigo blue eyes and a straight nose, with lips as glossy as ripe cherries. She seemed to have a perfect physique—neither too tall nor too short, slim, and (very much unlike me) the parts that were supposed to pop out did indeed pop, and the parts that were supposed to be cinched in were. Adorning that perfect body was a pearlescent dress decorated with abundant frills, without crossing the line into overly cute territory.

I... pushed aside... my feelings of envy. She just *oozed* self-confidence.

Still, I wasn’t shocked, nor were my feelings actually hurt, considering what she said was utterly obvious to anyone with eyes. Was she hoping I’d break down and cry, or something?

“No, you’re entirely correct. I haven’t the foggiest idea what anyone sees in me. Who might you be, by the way?”

When I calmly told her how I actually felt, with no sign of fear on my face, she was the one who suddenly turned pale.

“Er, well I...! You-you don’t know who I am?” Her indigo blue eyes looked as if they were about to pop out of her head. It was an expression of utter shock.

Huh? Are you really that well-known? My humble apologies, I am simply such an uncultured rube that I have never had the privilege of hearing your name nor seeing your face.

“Erm, I’m sorry. I think this is my first time meeting you. Have we met before?”

Maybe that was a little rude of me, but considering how rude she was earlier, I won’t be holding back! It’s one thing to be nervous about being out in public, but it’s another to forget your manners, after all!

“I am Verbena Argenteia, the oldest daughter of the family hosting this party!” She shut the fan she’d been using with a clap and glared at me.

Wha-? But I already said my hellos to all the Argenteia children... was this witch—pardon, was Miss Verbena not present then?

“Oh, were you not there when I introduced myself to your family earlier?”

“When you...? You both came over when I was away from the table!”

“Ah, I see now. I beg your pardon, then.”

Hang on, this stuck-up—I mean, proud lady is Mr. Fisalis’ old playmate! No wonder he didn’t choose her. She probably wouldn’t have agreed to a contract marriage in the first place, and even if she did, there’s no way she’d have gotten along with Miss Calendula.

Miss Verbena was growing angrier by the second, while I was only feeling more and more calm.

“How rude! What could Cercis possibly see in you?” she said, disgusted. *Wow, what a cliché thing to say, too!* In total contrast to the raging vibes I was getting from Miss Verbena, I on the other hand, was cool as a cucumber.

“You’re right, again. As I said before, I haven’t the foggiest idea, myself. Why don’t you ask him in person? I’ll go with you, if you’d like.”

“Wha—!?”

I doubt I’d understand his feelings even if he explained them, though.

Miss Verbena, you look like a deer in the headlights. That expression isn’t doing your face any favors. Did you think I’d cry? Not a chance. I’m not that kind of protagonist.

Serves you right, in fact!

I wasn’t the slightest bit disheartened, but Miss Verbena’s tightly clenched fan began to tremble.

“I’ve had about enough of you, you little...” One moment she was growling at me as if something had snapped in her, but then the next:

“Whoa, there. Did you need something with my wife?” I heard someone say, suddenly materializing between Miss Verbena and I.

“Oh, Mr. Fisalis.”

“Cercis!”

We unintentionally talked over one another.

“Vi... Did Verbena say something to you?” Mr. Fisalis asked from where he stood in front of me, turning his head back to look at me.

Oh, he called me by my nickname since we’re out in public.

“Yes. She wanted to know why you chose me and what exactly you see in me,” I informed him straightforwardly.

Miss Verbena was startled by my bluntness and hid her mouth behind her fan again. “Wha-what are you saying? Ah ha ha ha ha!” her face twitched as she attempted to laugh off her blunder.

“Is that right, Verbena?” I could almost feel Mr. Fisalis glaring at her. His dark brown eyes glinted dangerously.

She did not respond. Perhaps realizing she couldn’t finagle her way out, she quickly dropped her gaze and hung her head.

“Oh, come now. I’ll tell you as much as you’d like to hear!” The threatening atmosphere vanished and Mr. Fisalis’ face lit up with a wide smile.



“Whaaat?”

“Huhhh?”

Miss Verbena raised her head in shock; meanwhile, a voice in my head shrieked, *What did he just say!?*

Way to rain on our parades, Mr. Fisalis.

Mr. Fisalis launched into an explanation, unbothered by the tension, not to mention anger, in the air, “To start with, her determination is her best quality, that’s for certain. And once she sets her mind to something, she doesn’t give it up easily, either. I’m often away from the manor, so she looks after it in my place, and she’s even won the hearts of all the servants. Even under the pressure of her new title of duchess, which must be quite a lot, she never complains or leaves anything unfinished. Isn’t she just amazing?”

I do believe this is the first he’s ever showered me with praise so enthusiastically!

“Er, ye-yes...” Miss Verbena barely managed to respond. I was still completely at a loss for words.

Whaddaya mean ‘away from the manor’? You’d shut yourself up in the outbuilding with your mistress! I railed at him internally. Not that I could ever let that out there!

“I rarely have the time for domestic affairs, as busy as I am with my work, but even still, she’s nothing less than friendly to me and greets me when I come home every day with a smile! And *what* a smile it is! Doesn’t it just make your exhaustion disappear?”

“In-indeed...”

Well, yeah, that’s my job, isn’t it? And you ‘rarely had time for domestic affairs’ because you were obsessed with your girlfriend! And those smiles are fake, by the way.

Sorry. I’ve recovered enough for my inner heckler to come back out.

Mr. Fisalis showed no signs of stopping, though, and seemed to be getting even more worked up, now adding hand gestures.

“She has filled every nook and cranny in the manor with warmth. The whole place!”

“That-that is quite a lot of square footage...”

What’s this? Miss Verbena’s looking around nervously.

Though, to be fair, I’ve been doing the same. I might as well still be looking for Mr. Fisalis, considering how I’m frantically looking around the room.

But as expected, he hasn’t noticed.

“I had expected she’d be thorough, but I’m absolutely floored by how hard she works. No man could do what she does! You wouldn’t be able to look away from him for a second!”

More silence from Miss Verbena.

Pretty sure I was the only one who got floored—by fancy food poisoning. It’s true, I do try ever so hard, but in a slightly different way than you’re imagining. I can’t say anything here, so I’ll let it slide... But make no mistake, he’s right. I’m no frail heroine!

I was getting so worked up inside that I was starting to feel dizzy.

Miss Verbena couldn’t even get a word in edgewise. All she could do was listen to Mr. Fisalis rain down praise upon me.

She was totally dumbstruck.

“She is very mature, too, even though she’s younger than you and I. Just seeing her motivates me to do my best, too. After all, it’s my duty to protect her and the family! Now I have the confidence to not crumble under pressure.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as if he’d just finished a passionate speech.

When he opened his eyes, he was wearing an amazing smile that felt like a breath of fresh air.

Ah, I feel completely recharged...

Miss Verbena wasn’t the only one who heard him boast about his wife. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me!

I sense a new round of pestering coming my way!

I don't remember how long he went on for, but when he was finally done, he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and smiled. I think I felt my soul leave my body at the humiliation.

Miss Verbena just stood there, nearly in tears as she repeatedly apologized. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I understand now, I'm sorry."

5 — The Tea Party

Tweet, tweet, twee-twee.

The weather was so tranquil it could make you sleepy, with a breeze carrying the gentle scent of lush green foliage.

The breeze gently washed over me.

This garden, where I was currently enjoying the fresh air, was the pride of the Fisalis family. Dozens of aromatic sweets and piping-hot, amber-hued tea sat on a specially prepared table.

It was the perfect day for my first tea party at the manor.

The guest list consisted of Miss Iris—who had helped with the preparations—along with Miss Sanguinneah, Miss Nastersham, Miss Krokusse, and Miss Columbine.

In other words, the very people who suggested I have a tea party in the first place.

“I was so surprised at the party the other evening, though!” Miss Iris giggled melodically, her voice like a ringing bell.

My guests were all enjoying their tea around the table.

“How I envy you, Miss Viola! To be adored by a man as wonderful as your husband!” Miss Krokusse said with warmth in her eyes.

“There were so many rumors circulating, but that dispelled them all, I’m sure.”

“It was the first time I’d ever seen the duke say anything like that.”

“Me too!” the others replied.

The ladies appeared to be enjoying themselves with lively conversation; I, on the other hand, could only feel my cheek twitching.

No moore! All I want to do is pretend that never happened!

“We-we really don’t need to bring that up again, ah ha ha ha...” I smiled weakly, already sick of hearing about it.

The evening in question:

Mr. Fisalis had basically given a lecture on how proud he was of me in front of a whole crowd of people.

It’s as if he gets his kicks from humiliating me! Something that felt suspiciously like my soul left my body that night.

To Miss Verbena, however, it must have been like stepping on a landmine... just as I’d intended.

Each of the three of us found ourselves in the spotlight (albeit in different ways), and the ones who finally put an end to it were actually the hosts, the Argenteias.

“Give it a break already, Verbena! Sorry about that, Cercis!” the Argenteia siblings told us, flashing several thumbs up, as they dragged Miss Verbena away.

“It was no problem! I had more to say, but I can continue next time!” he replied with a smile and a hand in the air.

Hold on! There’s isn’t going to be a ‘next time’! Stop!

Quite the opposite of an out-of-body experience, my soul hurriedly returned to my body at his mention of a ‘next time.’

“Oh, Vi. Are you alright? She didn’t do anything to you, did she?”

He examined my face in concern, but all I wanted to do was shout that I was more mentally scarred by what he had said than anything Miss Verbena had thrown at me!

I did not, of course, shout at him.

“Not at all. And then you stepped in...” *Pay no attention to the corners of my mouth twitching under the strain of suppressing my real feelings.*

“I’m glad I was able to make it in time, then,” he replied with another refreshing smile. *Too late to correct him now.*

“Ah, you were looking for me, weren’t you? Did you need something?”

“Huh? Hmm... oh, that’s right. Would it be alright if I held a tea party?”

Yeah, that.

The tea party had slipped my mind during my moment with Miss Verbena.

He looked puzzled for a split second at my sudden proposal for a tea party, but his expression quickly returned to normal and he readily agreed. “That sounds like a great idea! By all means, invite your friends over.”

“Er, yes. Thank you.”

“Let Rohtas and Dahlia know; they’ll get everything prepared for you. I’m sure they’ll be pleased.”

“Sure.” I’ll opt out of asking why they’ll be pleased.

...oh.

I just remembered something I would rather I hadn’t.

I hadn’t noticed how the way everyone looked at Mr. Fisalis and I had turned warm and fuzzy, because I was utterly frozen in fear!

“Miss Viola?” Miss Nastersham asked, peering perplexedly at me while my mind was elsewhere.

“Ah, I’m sorry! I was just caught up in how lovely the weather is.”

Ah ha ha ha.

I paid particular care when picking up my cup and saucer to avoid showing how worked up I was. That is to say, the tea party was officially underway.

“I’m just happy to see that the duke is finally acting his age,” Miss Iris chuckled grimly.

She was in yet another fluttery, pink ensemble.

“Thank you.”

“Indeed. About Miss Verbena—given that the Argenteia and Fisalis families are on great terms with each other, and that their sons were all friends as children, she was once the most likely candidate when it came time for the

duke to get married.”

“Ah, I see.”

It's no surprise that someone like me, who rarely ever went out and didn't have any juicy gossip to offer in return, hasn't heard about this.

Listening to her explanation, it's becoming impressively clear just how much this girl knows.

“In reality, though, they never got engaged or anything like that. And even though Miss Verbena was madly in love with the duke, he was... well, you know? So she was probably mortified to hear him talk about getting married not to her, but to *you*, whom she had never met. I mean, one starts to get a bit impatient at twenty.”

“Ah ha ha ha...”

I had a thought while I was at the evening party: that it was improbable at any age, for Mr. Fisalis to ever say the words, “Would you marry me?” to someone who really liked him.

He's too arrogant for that. Plus, once you say that, there's no backing out.

So I guess that's why he chose me over Miss Verbena.

“Sorry, I'll stop talking about Miss Verbena. I should know better. I'm already twenty,” Miss Iris said, casually revealing her own age.

“I'm twenty, as well,” said Miss Krokusse.

“Twenty-one,” Miss Columbine added.

“And I'm nineteen.” Miss Nastersham was the youngest out of the four.

Among the aristocracy in the Flür Kingdom, eighteen to twenty was considered the proper age to get married, so they were all quickly approaching a critical point in their lives.

You might even say they'd passed it already!

“That's why we have to go to all the events we can, to gather information and inspect the goods!” they all said in perfect harmony. *That sounds like something a pick-up artist would say.*

“Exactly. So when word got out that I’d been invited to this tea party, oh so many people were envious!” giggled Miss Krokusse as she sipped her tea.

“Huh? Of my tea party?” *Why would that be*, I wondered, cocking my head.

“Lots of people want to be friends with you!”

“Wait, what?” Miss Columbine’s response confused me even more.

“You’re so lovely and well-put-together, graceful, and good at both dancing and conversation. You have a prestigious social standing, and what’s more—a loving, attractive husband. Who wouldn’t want to be friends with someone like that?”

“Wh-Whaaat? Who’s been saying that!?”

I didn’t think it was possible for my eyes to open as wide as they did then.

Just who are you describing? I know you mean me, but you’ve just created an entirely new character!

“It’s no wonder he chose you!” Miss Iris declared.

C-calm down.

This is getting out of hand. It’s all just a big misunderstanding.

“I-I’m really not all that special!” *Aaand already teary-eyed.*

“There’s no need to be so modest, you know! You truly are a lovely person, Miss Viola,” Miss Iris told me, her almond eyes smiling again. “You’re always wearing dresses by Madame Fleur, for one thing. The dress you were wearing the other night was so beautiful! I thought you looked so effortlessly stylish wearing the same colors as the duke! You made for such a striking couple that I was a bit intimidated. That elegant, subdued shade of violet... Until then, I never thought that shade would suit me, but when I saw you, I thought that I’d like to try wearing it, too!”

Oh, nooo. I let Mr. Fisalis have his way with our outfits, and now I bet she really means we looked like one of those tacky matching couples!

“You shone even brighter than your jewelry! Glossy strawberry blonde hair is trendy with the young people right now!”

This has to be a joke.

“Your dancing was so impressive everyone was wondering who taught you. The search for your instructor is getting frantic! You let your partners lead no matter how dreadful they were, so they wouldn’t be embarrassed, but still moved with such polish—down to your fingertips, even. Everyone was sighing as they watched you glide across the floor!”

That teacher was my butler, so you’re never going to find him! Er, should Rohtas open a dance academy, perhaps?

“And even your tea party manners today. Watching you drink so elegantly without making a sound, I feel like I’m looking at a physical embodiment of a book on etiquette! I can’t help but be enchanted by you! Seems like I ought to be looking for your teacher in that area, too.”

Oh, but Dahlia’s so scary. LOL, not really, though.

I nearly dropped my cup and saucer. I had a good grip on it, though, so no one else seemed to notice.

My maid taught me that, too. She’s not like other teachers.

I... I think my characterization might be running a bit wild! What with that night I’d like to bleach out of my brain and all these misunderstandings, I can never show my face in public again!

6 — More Guests

My first tea party came to a close with everyone urging, “Do come visit me, next time!” as they happily made their way home. My mental stamina worn very thin, I left the cleanup to the maids and headed back to my room.

The moment I stepped through the bedroom door, I assumed the position and dove headlong into my cushy sofa.

“Did I become a lovely, elegant wife somehow?” I asked myself as I clung to a throw pillow and flailed in mental anguish.

“But, Madam! They weren’t wrong in saying so,” Mimosa said, smiling over me as I suffered through my personal crisis.

“Do I dare show my face in public again? I’m so ashamed! I want to go back to just being a shut-in!” I cried, burying my face in the pillow with my butt in the air. Totally undignified.

“You will have a difficult time living that way,” Dahlia chided, unapologetically shoving my butt back down. *How would it be difficult*, I wondered, removing the pillow from my face and blinking up at Dahlia.

“Why?”

“Well, you’ve had invitations to tea parties and get-togethers flooding in over the past few days.”

Heck.

“Nyet!”

I thought I would fall off the sofa.

Dahlia laid out the facts with a faint smile on her face, an emotional one-eighty to me holding my head in panic.

“Your popularity in high society has soared since that soiree the other night. How shall I put it... not only did Master finally come to his senses, but it seems he praised you with intense passion, Madam...”

Double heck.

“Nyeeet!”

Stop talking! You’re killing me! I can practically see the pearly gates!

I buried my face back into the pillow and covered my ears.

Stop bringing up my dark past!

“There, there, Madam. Just because you have received invitations does not mean you are required to attend all of them,” Dahlia gently assured me, stroking my back as I trembled frightfully.

“Really?”

“Yes. Not all of them were sent with good intentions, you see. Even if the invitations are from families that are friends with the Fisalis family, it’s possible that they are only seeking to advance their own station.”

She spoke with a kind voice, but what she said was frightening.

High society is terrifying!

Having been impoverished until marrying Mr. Fisalis, I was completely unfamiliar with the darker side of high society, and I’d been all the happier for it.

Mo money, mo problems, as they say.

Even though I was on the sofa, I reflexively scuttled away, cheeks twitching.

Seeing that I was frightened to hear of society’s underbelly, Dahlia said, “There’s no need to worry, Madam. Rohtas and I will handle it with due diligence,” with an unusually radiant smile.

Mimosa nodded fervently next to her and smiled in a similar manner.

Handle what? How?

...I can’t press Dahlia and Mimosa for details when they’re smiling like that. I’m sure everything will be fine. Those are very reassuring, dark grins on their faces!

“...Thanks, then. I’m counting on you.”

Ahh, everyone's protecting me!

While I was busy killing time, one of Mr. Fisalis' personal maids came to inform me that he had arrived home.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Madam, but Master has returned."

"Oh, is it that late already?"

There was no time to panic about dark underbellies or pasts.

I didn't need to change my outfit since I'd worn my usual clothes for the tea party, but my dress had become somewhat disheveled after lying on the sofa. I quickly got up off said sofa and, as I was smoothing out my dress and making myself presentable, the maid added, "Er, also, Master did not come home alone. He actually has guests, as well..." All the while, she stared at the ceiling uncomfortably.

"I hadn't heard anyone was coming to visit. Who is it?"

"They are Master's colleagues." Dahlia said in a crisp manner befitting her role as head maid, apparently listening in.

Mr. Fisalis' maid's expression returned to its usual professional look and she responded, "By colleagues, you mean knights?" I asked the maid as Mimosa adjusted my clothes. Mr. Fisalis was the commander of an intelligence agency, a special division, within the military.

That would make his 'colleagues' his subordinates within the division, then. Or could they be military not belonging to his division?

"Yes, they're from the special division."

Okay, so they're his subordinates.

I exhaled in relief that they weren't higher-ups.

"Oh! We've got to get a move on. Thanks, Dahlia, Mimosa. Okay, let's go."

Mimosa went over my face with the powder puff one more time before the three of us hurried out.

What could this be about, though? This is the first time Mr. Fisalis has brought guests home.

“Welcome home!” I called to him as I trotted to the entryway. He was there talking with Rohtas as usual, except this time...

“Hello, Madam!”

“Sorry for barging in!”

“Wow, she really *is* gorgeous!”

“Whoa, she’s the real deal!”

“She’s like the ideal wife!”

“Eeee, she’s so lovely!”

A veritable explosion of chatter.

Just how many people did he bring home? And what does he mean by ‘ideal wife’!?

...Ahem. Mustn’t let myself get worked up.

The normally tranquil entrance was full of noisy folks in uniform that day.



I was surrounded by knights from the moment I appeared. There were even women among them!

“I haven’t gotten a look at ya since the commander’s wedding!”

“You looked so gorgeous then, but seeing you up close, I can tell you’re more the cute type!”

“Wow, you smell so nice~”

“This must be a dream! I feel like if I try to hug you, you’ll disappear!”

“Yo! You can’t just say stuff like that, you creeps! You know what I do to people who harass women!”

“Go sit down!”

“Eeeek! Yes, ma’am!”

“Er, you...!”

Stop squishing meee!

I might be tall and thin, but I was totally stuck between a bunch of even taller, beefier knights!

I was just about to lose my cool when Mr. Fisalis pulled me toward him with one arm around my shoulder, saying, “Hey, stop mobbing Viola!” as he rescued me from my captors.

Phew, safe at last.

“We—welcome home, Mr. Fisalis. I see we have more guests...” I repeated with a strained smile, looking up at everyone’s beautiful—but way too close—faces.

“I’m sorry for not letting you know ahead of time... Anyway, these are my subordinates from the division,” he said with a worn-out expression as he watched them chatter away.

Looking over the lot of them, I replied, “Oh, well then. I’ll have to get some refreshments ready.” They answered with wide grins and enthusiastic nods.

“No, just give them some alcohol and snacks,” Mr. Fisalis said curtly, gazing at

them with narrowed eyes...

“What!? You’re so cruel, Commander!”

“Why can’t you be more like your wife? She’s an angel!”

“Yeah! Eat my shorts, Commander!”

...only to be met with a wave of insults.

For the time being, anyway, I peeled Mr. Fisalis’ arm from its place around my shoulder and said, “I will do no such thing. You all look after Mr. Fisalis, so I’m going to treat you all properly! Take a seat in the salon, please—it will just take a few minutes. Rosa, show them to the salon, if you would,” I instructed Mr. Fisalis’ maid, who was standing nearby.

“Yes, Madam.”

Once Mr. Fisalis and the knights were escorted out of the entryway, Rohtas, Dahlia, Mimosa, and I quickly huddled together. It had been a while since we had done this, but we fell back into the habit easily.

“How many people in total showed up, Rohtas?”

Start with confirming the guest count. Rohtas ought to know that.

“Fifteen in all.”

“I thought you’d know! Thanks. Tell Cartham he should prepare some food. Some hors d’oeuvres would be fine in the meantime! Oh, and plenty of booze!”

“Right away, Madam,” Rohtas confirmed before promptly hurrying to the kitchen.

I watched him leave and then began with the instructions.

“Dahlia, arrange for some maids to be assigned to the salon for now.” *During the Cercis Shift, when Mr. Fisalis was the only guest, Mimosa and I could take care of him just fine, but today we have fifteen plus him.*

This is a job for more than just the two of us. I need backup.

“Understood. I’ll prepare some tea for the maids,” said Dahlia, jogging off to the servants’ dining room.

That just left Mimosa.

“You and I, plus the backup Dahlia sends, will entertain everyone in the salon.”

“Yes, Madam!”

“Alrighty! Go team!”

I imagined myself strapping on a helmet, ready to do battle (again), and forward-marched to the salon with Mimosa at my side.

«MISSION BRIEF: Emergency Guest Shift now deploying. Apply the skills you learned during Cercis Shift.»

There are a lot more guests here today than we normally have over, though...

7 — Commander and Lieutenant Commander

Even though we're in Emergency Guest Shift, our elite team of servants is going all out and responding in no time at all! Mr. Fisalis probably has no idea how hard they work behind the scenes.

I can only pray they don't revolt someday.

By the time I got to the salon, Mimosa had already put out apéritifs, tea, snacks, and sweets.

Wasn't she just in the entryway a second ago? To be able to do all this so fast, what did she do? Teleport?

Two maids sent by Dahlia joined us in the salon shortly thereafter, officially starting the entertainment!

“Would you pass out the glasses? Use these if they want wine. Do we need more tea?”

We had several kinds of alcohol, so we handed out appropriate glasses for each.

But just then, I spotted someone holding their saucer! That meant they wanted more tea. *Roger that!*

We laid out snacks that pair well with wine, as well as those that go with spirits, but they were all drinking much faster than they were eating! We had made enough drinks for twenty people, but it seemed like they were all gone in mere minutes!

“It seems we've run out of alcohol, Mimosa. Tell Rohtas and have him bring more.” I whispered to Mimosa, hoping to avoid running out of drinks.

“Understood!”

I took a quick glance at everyone as I brewed tea, passed out glasses of alcohol, kept everyone entertained, and generally made sure that things were going smoothly and our guests were enjoying themselves.

After confirming I still had drinks and snacks to spare, my quick glance over the assembled knights gave me the impression that many of them were young.

And that they were all quite good-looking. There was a good mix of tough guys, sweethearts, and flirts.

Is being hot one of the qualifications for becoming a knight? The examiner must've been a sucker for a pretty face, then... er, excuse me, that's going off topic.

Leaving the question of a possible knight-hotness grading system for another time, I feasted my eyes on the sight of them all smartly dressed in their dashing uniforms.

Although they were knights by rank, this special division was actually a group of elite intellectuals, so the proportion of muscleheads among them was low. That earned the group a high score from me.

Even among this harem of hotties, however, the maids under Mimosa were working in professional detachment, without so much as blushing.

I wouldn't have expected anything less from them. I should follow their example instead of just ogling!

Looks like there are three lady knights... and, on par with the guys, they're all drop-dead gorgeous! Am I drooling...? Uh, whoops.

I narrowly avoided a major social mishap there.

Er, rather, there's no harm in admiring the beauty of a beauty!

All three of them were slender and tall, with well-defined busts and hips. Their hair was tied back in what was probably regulation style, with not a single strand out of place.

Oh no, I think I'm starting to understand how pervy old men feel...

Ha ha, I shouldn't worry, though! Despite Mr. Fisalis being around these beautiful women every day, he still wants to look at me, huh?

Speaking of Mr. Fisalis, his good looks still stand out, even among all these beautiful people!

Mr. Fisalis came over to me while the servants were busy with tea and whispered in my ear, “Sorry, Vi. They all somehow heard that you were having a tea party today and begged to come, too.” He was frowning slightly with what was probably guilt.

“Please don’t worry about it. Everyone is happy to help out.” I answered with a pleasant smile... which was, of course, mere lip service.

You could have let me know they were coming. That way, we all wouldn’t have been rushed off our feet, but nooo.

Mr. Fisalis sighed in relief at my forced smile. At that moment, a knight stepped between us and said, “Don’t underestimate the best of the best, Commander!”

“What’re you talking about, Corydalis?” Mr. Fisalis’ gentle smile vanished in an instant and was replaced by a deep voice and glaring eyes.

“Did you forget we’re an intel-gathering and investigative division? Finding out that she was holding a tea party was a walk in the park!” The knight was not even the slightest bit intimidated by Mr. Fisalis’ glare—maybe he was used to it—and smiled easily as he answered.

Hang on, what did you just say? Gathering intel is a walk in the park? Maybe for you—you’re in an intelligence agency!

So does that mean there was an information leak within the manor? Could my habit of wearing servants’ clothes and working like one of them have leaked out, too!? That would spell ruin for the family!

I felt the blood drain from my face at the thought.

I can see the headline clearly: “Dishonored Duchy: Local Duchess Plays Maid While Her Husband is Away!”

I’m done for!

The knight must have noticed how pale I looked and hurriedly said, “Oh, er, our source was one of your guests. You can’t get anything out of the guards here. Your staff are outstanding, though—a good match for us! We ought to try and recruit them!”

He replied as if he didn't really understand what I meant.

"Oh, I see." He really had me worried there. Looks like my daily routine is still safe.

I sighed in relief and the color returned to my face.

I knew our staff were professionals! I regret doubting them, even for a second.

The knight continued to explain himself while I internally apologized to the servants.

"I mean, you wouldn't be able to peek inside this place even if you wanted to—the hedges are carefully grown to hide everything, and then to top it all off, the staff are all tight-lipped. They don't even gossip with the delivery men or repairmen. It'd be a real pain to try to gather intel here."

Way to go, Bellis! Good job, servants!

The knight looks kind of disappointed, but aren't you better off not spying on your boss?

"Don't spy on us," Mr. Fisalis told him with a sour look on his face, apparently thinking the same thing.

"But you won't tell me, no matter how much I ask. Ah, but then again, you're the biggest source of leaks, Commander," the knight smirked.

I nearly burst out laughing at that.

Even if the servants do a good job of concealing information, when the duke himself is carelessly trotting his mistress around in high society, well...

Rohtas'—everyone's—efforts are all in vain.

And now, instead of his mistress, he's suddenly showing off his lawful wife instead, and going on about how great she is in public.

That's a bad look. That's a really bad look, Mr. Fisalis.

I wanted to hide my face in my hands.

"Zip it, Corydalis!" the man in question snapped in response to the knight, his scowl growing deeper by the second.

“Yes, siiiir. Oh, Madam, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Corydalis, I’m the lieutenant commander. You can call me Cory! The commander and I are totally professional at work, but we’re good buddies off the clock. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you!” he said with a jaunty pop of his shoulders, not even seeming to register Mr. Fisalis’ sour expression.

Corydalis had nicely chiseled features, too.

He had light blue-green eyes crinkled in a smile.

“Cory—”

“‘Corydalis’ is fine!” Mr. Fisalis interrupted.

“Corydalis, then. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Viola.”

“I can’t say that I approve of the stuff this fellow gets up to in private, but at work, I have no complaints. Despite appearances.”

“My appearance is none of your concern. And more importantly, what exactly do you mean by you ‘can’t approve’ of what I do in private?”

“You know why. Or do I need to ask everyone else to remind you?”

Mr. Fisalis got the message and stared at the ground in silence.

He’s way too easy to read.

Looking at Mr. Fisalis with amusement, Corydalis continued. “Remember back before you were in this special division, when you belonged to the First Platoon? Oh, I was there, too, of course...”

I wasn’t sure why, but he started chattering proudly about Mr. Fisalis’ past military achievements. I didn’t understand what the point of bringing it up was, and neither did Mr. Fisalis, judging by his uncomfortable expression.

I guess we’re friends now.

Moments later, Rohtas appeared and informed us that the food was ready, thus finally putting an end to Corydalis’ little lecture.

Le sigh.

What bet did I lose to end up with these guys?

8 — A Party at Full Swing

Rohtas led us to the main dining room, where even more alcohol and gourmet treats awaited us.

But we went through so much back in the salon... don't tell me there's still more? Egads.

Since it was a formal affair, a buffet had been set up with several small tables around it.

We'd been burning through food and drink since the start of the party. Everyone was so slim and well-proportioned, so just when I was beginning to wonder where they were putting all that food, one of the lady knights appeared (seemingly out of nowhere) by my side and explained, "We might be intelligence officers, but we're still knights, so we do daily training. Physical training, that is—which is why we're so hungry."

You'd never think this beautiful woman was a knight, but just moments earlier I'd watched her scarf down more food and drink than I thought possible.

"Oh, now I understand. I was so surprised. You're all in such good shape, I simply couldn't figure out where you were putting all that food," I answered her straightforwardly.

"I assume the commander usually has a hearty appetite, too, right?" she asked, sweeping her silky blonde bangs to the side and gazing at me with eyes the color of red wine. As I stared into her eyes, her beauty was like a shock to my system that made the rest of the world seem ugly in comparison.

Inside, I was a little embarrassed, but when she prompted me to think back on all the times I'd seen Mr. Fisalis eat, I replied, "...now that you mention it... yes, he does." As I mentally replayed the now-familiar scene of him eating, I realized he didn't usually finish his breakfast, but he would eat huge dinners.

Meanwhile, I'd have to surrender halfway through or else my stomach... Oops, there I go again, revealing the skeletons in my closet.

I hung my head in shame internally, but didn't let it show on the surface.

"The commander really is great at his job."

A woman with slightly curly, bronze-toned hair came over to me.

That reminds me—I've never really asked him about his work. Lieutenant Commander Corydalis' lengthy lecture was the first I'd heard about it.

The main reason I never asked is that I wasn't interested, but still.

"I had no idea. I know Corydalis mentioned it just a little while ago, but Mr. Fisalis doesn't usually talk about his work."

I couldn't very well say, "because I never ask," so I just gave a vague smile. Of course, I'd heard that he couldn't talk about his duties in great detail at home anyway, so I just figured that he wouldn't be able to answer even if I did.

And again, I didn't really care.

I feel like that bears repeating.

"We aren't out the front lines. Our division works behind the scenes," said a woman with a most lovely smile. This one had hair like silver threads.

Yes, she also appeared out of nowhere.

I suddenly realized I was completely surrounded by a ring of dashing lady knights.

At last, I have acquired my very own har—

Ahem. No.

All of a sudden, I realized... I was basically back at the women's club.

"Commander's orders are very precise. He never wastes a single word."

"Is that so?"

"And doesn't treat the women any differently than the men."

"You don't say."

"He gets things done promptly, too."

"Does he?"

Now that they had me trapped, they started to wax poetic about what a great commander he was.

“Back during that one infiltration operation, he was prepared for catastrophe,” said the blonde with a grim smile.

I didn’t know what she meant by ‘that one operation,’ but I nodded along anyway.

“Mmhmm. But he still pulled off that one-in-a-million plan and we all made it out safely,” the silver-haired woman mused with a faraway look in her eye.

“His directives were utterly brilliant that day,” said the bronze-haired one, spellbound.

‘Distinguished service in battle’ this, ‘a man of the sword as well as the pen’ that: it seemed Mr. Fisalis had quite the reputation at work.

I couldn’t get anything more than some “oh”s, “mm”s, and “I see”s in.

It’s no different than my ‘chat’ with Corydalis— looks like today I’m just going to be bombarded with Mr. Fisalis stories.

We drank, we ate, and then got back to drinking.

The women rapidly grew chattier. They were all smiles as they amused themselves with stories about Mr. Fisalis. Which is to say, they praised him to high heaven, the enchantment apparent in their eyes.

“So, you’re all fans of Mr. Fisalis?” I asked, taking advantage of a brief lull in the conversation.

“Goodness, no!”

“You bet! I’m glad he’s my boss, but sometimes...”

“The way he acts in private, is just...”

“Besides, we’re all married!” they insisted, albeit with smiles on their faces.

Good grief, they’re married, too?

From there, the conversation turned to:

“Parading your mistress around even while married, though—I wouldn’t stand

for it.”

“Seriously! If my husband did that, I’d strangle him!”

“And ignoring his lovely wife? Miss me with that nonsense, right?”

“Call ’im over here! I’ll strangle him for you! Ha ha ha!”

As they drank more and more, they switched from praising Mr. Fisalis to judging him. The tone changed, too, to one rather—no, *quite* scathing.

They were getting really worked up, too.

Just a second ago they were preaching to me about how wonderful he was, and then they changed their minds so fast! And is it just my imagination, or are their eyes starting to look a little glazed over?

Somebody H-E-L-P M-E!

As my eyes started to tear up at the realization that I couldn’t stop their drinking binge, there came a worried voice from behind me.

“Yowza! What did you guys say to Madam!?”

When I turned around, Corydalis was standing there, complete with a distressed look on his face.

The jovial ladies, however, continued on without a care.

“Uhh, lemme break down for you jus’ how much of a good for nothin’ that command... huh?”

They’re completely gone. Drunk out of their minds.

Hearing that made Corydalis even more upset.

“Jeez, you all look awful! Yo! Get these girls away from Madam!” he directed the other knights nearby.

“Yes sir!”

“Heeey! We’re still talking to her! Leave us alooone!” one of the women said to the knights who tried to pull her away, bracing her legs as if she was going to put up a fight.

“After I took the time to tell Cercis’ wife all those great things about him! You

all went and undid everything I said!”

“Err, we told her nice things about ‘im, toooo.”

“I guess the topic kinda changed halfway, though.”

“It was a little more than ‘kinda’!”

“But it was all truuue.”

“Which makes it even worse!”

Corydalis held his head in his hands.

“Vi! What happened?”

Mr. Fisalis came rushing over to me from where he had been idly chatting; everyone else just watched as the drunk women shoved each other around in frustration.

“Er, I think the ladies are drunk,” I informed him truthfully, with a strained smile.

“Argh, them again...” he said as he threw his head back and covered his face with his hands.

“Well, at least they had a good time, right?”

“Yes, but what did they tell you?” he asked, bending over slightly and gazing into my eyes.

“Oh, heheh, all sorts of things,” I nervously tried to laugh it off.

“Like what?” he pressed further.

No, I’m being evasive because it’s in your best interest that you don’t hear it. But I guess if you reeeally want me to tell you...

I will!

“Well, they started with your military achievements and the quality of your command—apparently, you’re almost *too* good at your job— but once the conversation turned to your private life, the praise turned into criticism. The points they made, in fact, are so difficult to describe right now that it’s probably best I start from the end—which could be summed up as ‘I shouldn’t stand for

it'..."

Mr. Fisalis' face quickly drained of its color as I laid out the facts.

"...Vi?"

"Yes?"

"Please stop. I don't think I'll ever recover if you keep going..."

He cut me off really fast for someone who had wanted to hear the details so badly, and now even seemed to have tears in his eyes.

"Look at it this way—it means that they really like you..."

"...I can't be the only one here who doesn't believe that."

If you say so!

9 — What Mr. Fisalis Knew at That Time

A few days after the knightly invasion:

“I know it’s short notice, but I’ll be leaving tomorrow on a business trip,” Mr. Fisalis suddenly informed me upon his return home from work.

“Huh? A business trip?” I cocked my head.

This really is short notice.

“Yes. I’ll be gone for about two weeks, so please take care of things around here.”

His beautiful brown eyes—narrowed as if the mere thought of being away for so long was painful—gazed deeply into my own.

Sure, no problem! Just stop looking at me like that.

Whenever he’s had a business trip before, Rohtas was the one who informed me after he left—if I was informed at all. So why is he telling me himself now? Is he going to a new post? And then he tells me to look after the manor while he’s away.

That’s how it always went; that was our “business as usual.”

There was little else I could do at that point except be confused, but I replied, “Of course. It’s no problem! I have Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa, so it’s not as though I’ll be lonely!” *How could I be lonely when I have the servants here with me? Or should I say, I still haven’t completely adjusted to you being here at all,* I mumbled to myself.

Mr. Fisalis only gave me a vague little smile in response to my cheerful, reassuring reply.

I am so jealous that he’s got the kind of bone structure that makes even the vaguest of smiles look great!

“...Right. I asked Rohtas and Dahlia, as well, so you don’t have to worry.”

“Understood!”

Let me just show you out... with a huge grin on my face!

In the Two Weeks that Followed:

I was living my servant life to the fullest, just as I had been doing back before Mr. Fisalis and Miss Calendula split.

Doing the cleaning and washing, decorating.

Pulling weeds and tending the flowers in the garden.

All three meals were like a global food festival and, of course, I ate them all happily with the servants in their dining hall!

I had gotten several invites to tea parties and the like, but Rohtas made for a great filter. He always told me, “I believe it would be in your interest not to go to these,” before replying to them all that Mr. Fisalis was busy and that we would be unable to attend. I was never terribly sociable, so turning them down was a relief.

I very much enjoyed those peaceful days, and in the blink of an eye it seemed my sad days were in the past.

And then, before I knew it, those two weeks had passed, as well.

“Good day, Madam!”

Rohtas had called me to the entryway, where a guest had just arrived. It was the dashing, blonde lady knight I had met earlier.

“Oh, hello!”

She looks as awe-inspiringly beautiful today as ever. I wonder if she’s on an errand.

The regal knight bowed to me with one hand on her breast as I stood admiring her beauty.

“I’ve come to deliver a message. The special division completed our mission without incident, so the troops are expected to return to the capital this evening,” she informed me.

She came all this way just to relay this message. I guess this means that Mr. Fisalis will come home after he finishes his report at the royal palace.

“So Mr. Fisalis will be going straight to the palace, then?”

We had dinner prep to consider, so I wanted to confirm my assumption with her.

“Affirmative. The commander will report immediately to the palace for debriefing. Following that, there will be a simple celebratory dinner, after which the commander will likely return home.”

“I understand. Thank you for coming all this way, even though I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

“That is all, then. I’ll take my leave now,” she excused herself before gallantly striding out of the entryway.

“She said they’re having a small banquet. If that’s the case, I wonder when Mr. Fisalis will actually be home,” I said to Dahlia as I picked up some fabric and a needle to work on another patchwork project.

“Probably in the wee hours of the morning, as usual,” she replied.

“Hmm, I don’t think I’ll be able to stay awake until then...”

After I had dinner with the servants, I waited in my room for Mr. Fisalis to come home. Even though I didn’t know when that would be, the thought of just going to sleep before he was back seemed rude.

Because I was busy every day, my internal clock had me getting up early and going to bed early. I wasn’t exactly proud of it, but I really wasn’t made for all-nighters.

“Why don’t you nap for a while? I’ll wake you if Master returns.”

“I dunno... If I let myself do that, I won’t be able to fall asleep later.”

As I was thinking over my options... *knockknockknock!* There came a hurried rapping on the door.

Without so much as waiting for a response, a voice called through, “It’s Mimosa. Madam! Master has arrived home!” At which point Dahlia opened the

door and Mimosa came tumbling in.

“Whaaat!? It’s not *that* late, is it?”

“No, it’s not.” Dahlia must have been surprised too, as this was the first time I’d ever seen her looking so dumbfounded.

“I mean, I only just ate dinner.”

“That’s right.”

Way to catch us off guard, Mr. Fisalis! ...ahem.

If he really is home, I’ve got to hurry if I’m going to greet him! At least my worries about staying up all night are on hold, for now.

“Shouldn’t he be at the palace banquet right about now, though?” I asked Mimosa as we scurried to the entryway.

“Apparently he didn’t go to it for some reason,” she replied, to my surprise.

“What!? They’d let him do that!?”

If it’s being held at the royal palace, that means the king or the military is hosting it—Mr. Fisalis’ superiors, in either case. Is he even allowed to skip out, then?

I couldn’t help but be shocked at his choice of actions.

“I don’t know...”

“Oh, sorry, I don’t know why I thought you would.”

There isn’t anything we could do about it, anyway, now that he’s home.

We rushed on to the entrance.

Mr. Fisalis was just as gorgeous as he was when I last saw him two weeks prior, but I could sense a certain weariness emanating from him. Maybe it was the way his usually silky brown hair was in slight disarray, or how he had sloppily unbuttoned his uniform, or maybe he was simply worn out.

Despite all that, he still looked great.

“Welcome home!” I called to him as I ran over to where he was talking with Rohtas.

No sooner did he say, “It’s so good to be back! Are you well, Viola?” than my vision suddenly went dark.

“Wha—What are you doing? Mr. Fisalis!?”

That’s right.

The cause of the darkness was Mr. Fisalis abruptly pulling me into a hug.

I can’t keep doing this, guys.

Maybe he’s just out of it from exhaustion?

Whatever the reason, his sudden embrace had me flustered.

“I made it back! Ahh, I missed your scent. So this is what coming home is supposed to feel like! I wanted to see you so badly that I finished my report as fast as I could and didn’t even go to the banquet!” he smiled as he gazed at me, loosening his grasp on me slightly.

Are you going to get in trouble for that, though?

“No, wa—wait a minute! You didn’t even make an appearance?”

“Oh, it’s fine! I was tired from the trip and not exactly in the best shape to go to a party.”

Liar.

‘Not in the best shape’ my butt! You seem full of energy to me.

“Not to mention, my subordinates were all utterly exhausted too, so the banquet was moved to a later date.”

Oh, so you all boycotted the party.

Still, I’m relieved to hear that he didn’t neglect a duty.

“I—I see... So you still haven’t eaten supper, then, have you?”

If the banquet was canceled, I mean.

“Er, yes. I couldn’t bear another second of not being able to—”

“I’ll have Cartham prepare something right away!”

I just had to stop him when it sounded like he was going to say something

questionable. Trust me!

I didn't bother trying to be ladylike as I unglued his arms from around my body.

"Wait here, please!" I ordered, shoving him into the salon. He hung his head as if dejected, but I wasn't sure why.

On my way to the kitchen to find Cartham, just as I turned into the corridor outside of the salon where I had deposited Mr. Fisalis I quite literally ran into the man himself.

"Speak of the devil! Why aren't you in the kitchen?"

"I had just gone to my room for something, but then Dahlia called for me, so I'm on my way now. She said that Master is back earlier than anticipated, no?" he replied with a wink.

Do you really have to wink every dang time you see me? Oh well, that's just a Classic Cartham Move, so I can't say it bothers me anymore.

"He is, so we need to get dinner ready for him—fast. Can you do that, even at this hour?"

No one (including me) had had a formal dinner that night, so I was concerned about whether Cartham could pull it off, but he answered in his typical fashion.

"*Bien sûr*, I have plenty of time! Just give me a few moments, if you please, Madame!" he said with a charming smile before quickly taking my hand and planting a little kiss on the back, suave as ever. I used to shriek and turn as red as a tomato when he did that, but at that point, I didn't even bat an eye.

I guess I'm not so easily embarrassed anymore. Not that that's something to be sad about.

"I'm sorry for dropping this on you so suddenly. I'm counting on y—" I said, leaving Mr. Fisalis' dinner to him without so much as acknowledging his little greeting.

"Viola? Who're you talk— Wha... Cartham! What do you think you're doing!?" It was Mr. Fisalis, sticking his head out of the salon. I watched as his face morphed from its usual composed expression in the first half of his speech, to

one of raw, unveiled emotion in the second half. What Mr. Fisalis had seen so vividly was the exact second that Cartham took my hand and kissed it! In mere milliseconds, Mr. Fisalis' gaze turned into a sharp glare that promised certain, painful death.

"Ma... Master!"

The aura of danger pouring off of Mr. Fisalis did not diminish even when Cartham ran over and addressed him, flustered to the point of stuttering. Mr. Fisalis' heavy glare settled squarely on the chef.

"Viola is *my* wife. That makes her *your* superior. How dare you put your hands on your superior like that!" he spat at Cartham in a voice so icy that it felt like everything around us froze.

This is a bit much for a simple misunderstanding, don't you think!?

That's what both Cartham and I were thinking, judging by our reaction to Mr. Fisalis' outrage.

"Huh!? You can't mean that!" we exclaimed in unintentional, yet perfect harmony with one another.

"Wha—? Why are you standing up for him!?" Mr. Fisalis' dagger-like gaze was now pointed straight at me.

Don't turn on me just for defending him! He's the one you're mad at, anyway! But then again, the fact that Cartham and I had the same response probably just added fuel to his fire.

A handsome person sure is impressive when angered, though, and I felt a chill run down my spine. Regardless, Mr. Fisalis had clearly misunderstood what was happening.

"I'm not defending Cartham! You've just got the wrong idea!" I said, staring back into Mr. Fisalis' formidably glinting brown eyes.

"How can you say that so with such certainty?" he replied, even louder than before and very unhappy at the prospect that I was defending Cartham. I knew I wasn't in the wrong, though, so I stood my ground!

"Because Cartham is married to Dahlia! He doesn't see me that way!"

“...Huh?”

““Huh?””

Wow, what a clever reply, Mr. Fisalis.

The tense atmosphere vanished as Mr. Fisalis stared blankly, mouth slightly ajar at my response and I did the same back to him.

What a pair of geniuses we are today... He couldn't possibly, could he?

Thinking that he, in fact, possibly could, I gingerly asked in very simple terms, “...Did... Did you not know that Cartham and Dahlia are married?”

“...Really? ...No, I didn't know.” Mr. Fisalis awkwardly shifted his gaze from me to Cartham.

“You were still small when Dahlia and I got married, Master,” Cartham said in what seemed like Mr. Fisalis' defense, but I wasn't done with Mr. Fisalis yet!

“That's just how Cartham shows affection—it's a simple greeting! Nothing more, nothing less! Sure, it flustered me the first time he did it, but none of the ladies here take it the wrong way.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, yes it is!” I replied, feeling almost proud, for some reason.

Once he was done staring at me, Mr. Fisalis' gaze turned to Cartham once again.

“Alright. Oh, and Cartham...”

“Yes, Master?” the chef politely cast his eyes downward and bowed slightly. This seemed to please Mr. Fisalis, because he then said, flatly: “No more ‘affection’ with Viola from now on.”

Cartham's face lit up in relief and he immediately replied, “Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!”

I don't really understand why Cartham was smiling when he replied, but what he left unsaid was still clear: I promise to keep my hands to myself.

10 — A Compromise?

One day, some time after he had come back from his two-week business trip, Mr. Fisalis happily informed me, “You know how I worked for two weeks straight? Well, I’m taking three days off now! It’s not very much, but I can finally relax.”

“Oh, really?”

“It’s only three days, but let’s do something nice.”

“Three whole days, huh? I see.”

“...Have a good night, then.”

“You as well.”

Mr. Fisalis withdrew to his room, completely unaware that we were on different wavelengths.

The next day:

I don’t know if his business trip was more grueling than I thought or what, but Mr. Fisalis didn’t get out of bed until almost the afternoon.

Concerned, as you might expect, I peeped through Mr. Fisalis’ bedroom door as Rohtas quietly went in to check on him.

“Is he alright?” I asked.

“He seems quite worn out. He’s still sound asleep,” the butler responded.

“Indeed, let us not wake him.”

“Good idea.”

You know what they say: never wake a sleeping baby.

...I mean, he totally deserves this break, so we should let him take it easy, just like he said!

So we tiptoed out of Mr. Fisalis’ room and headed to the main dining room

downstairs. I didn't know how long he would be asleep, so I had my lunch all alone that day.

"I'm going to go see Bellis after lunch. Most of the flowers should be at their best now."

"As you wish, Madam."

My maid uniform stayed in the closet that day, since Mr. Fisalis was home. I picked a relatively easy-to-wear and simple dress from my collection instead.

It's just one of the outfits I have in heavy rotation, though, so it'll be no big deal if it gets a little dirty.

Since I couldn't be doing housework with the servants like I usually did before Mr. Fisalis got home, I decided to prune the flowers instead.

This way, it will be easy to pick them when I need some to decorate with!

Lunchtime came and went, but Mr. Fisalis still had not gotten up.

How tired can you be?

It made me start to worry a little about exactly what kind of work he had been doing. It was important that he regained his strength, though, so I let him be and went with Mimosa to the garden to look for Bellis.

It felt good to be outside; the weather was calm and sunny.

I bet the flowers are blooming beautifully!

"It's a shame I can't play in the dirt, but it's nice to just look at the lovely flowers, too."

"It certainly is. Oh, don't move out from under the parasol!"

Mimosa was walking just behind me, shading my body from the sun. I didn't really care, but...

"We can't have that beautiful pale skin we worked so hard to achieve get burned in the sun!" — Spa Squad Captain Mimosa.

So she always carried a parasol for me when I went out to the garden.

I can't complain, though, since at least the sun isn't beating directly down on

me this way.

“I’ll be fiiiine!”

“But your beautiful skin will develop freckles!”

“You’re such a helicopter mom sometimes, Mimosa. Where do you think Bellis is, anyway?”

We were looking all around the expansive garden, but there was no trace of him.

Heck, even the other gardeners don’t know where he is.

“Isn’t he usually in the greenhouse around now?”

“Oh, good point, Mimosa! You’re very in tune with Bellis’ work schedule, aren’t you?”

Not to mention you’re his wife. You two are even more of an odd couple than Cartham and Dahlia, in my opinion, but that’s neither here nor there.

Mimosa grinned and blushed a tad at the compliment as I thought about what a cute couple she and Bellis made.

Eeeee, she’s so adorable! I couldn’t help but flail in ecstasy at just how precious Mimosa was when she was embarrassed.

We finally arrived at the greenhouse with me still mid-flail, and sure enough, we found the Demon King—I mean, Bellis. There were so many lovely flowers to choose from that we had to carefully look over them all as we decided which ones we wanted.

“Ooh, these would be perfect in the entryway!”

“What do you think of these for the dining room, Madam?”

“I think these would look very nice in the salon.”

Even though we rarely had guests, we tended to choose the most splendid flowers for the public areas of the manor. True to form, I preferred large-blossomed flowers, but since it made me sad to leave the cute little ones behind, I had Bellis make them into a tiny bouquet for my room.

A life with flowers is a life enriched, as they say.

The bouquet Bellis made for me featured lovely orange flowers, little red berries, and deep green leaves. Bellis was such a top-notch gardener that he even knew how to make bouquets! You'd never guess it, based on his calloused and work-hardened hands, but he was able to carefully arrange a delicate bouquet in just minutes.

The color palette and choice of flowers look great! Yet more exquisite arrangements! Bellis can do it all, from lavish gardens to delicate bouquets and arrangements in vases—he's a true botanical professional.

We convinced the professional to pause the flower selection and have some tea with us, but not without some grumbling. The weather was so dazzlingly lovely that day that we made it a picnic under one of the trees in the garden. A tea set and some sweets were brought from the house, and we laid a quilt on the grass to sit on. The grass provided the perfect cushion for us to sit and bask in the sun as we indulged in some of Mimosa's tea and Cartham's sweets.

"Ahh, this makes for a perfect tea time!" I said, closing my eyes as I raised my cup and saucer to my mouth, breathing in deeply to fully enjoy the tea's fruity aroma.

"Oh, Madam—you left this in the greenhouse," said Bellis as he handed me the little bouquet. I had planned to use it to decorate my room, but I was such an airhead and forgot it.

"Ugh, I'm such a doofus. Thanks, Bellis," I said, about to take the bouquet from him when...

"Bellis! What are you doing with Viola!?"

The voice belonged to Mr. Fisalis and was accompanied by the sound of footsteps rushing toward us over the grass.

"Mr. Fisalis?" the three of us said in unison, turning his way at the sound of his voice and mad dash across the lawn.

He looks extremely displeased, but I suppose anyone would if they were forced to sprint so soon after waking up.

"Bellis! What do you think you're doing with those flowers!? Are you trying to flatter Viola?"

“...Why would...” Bellis’ usual blank look only enraged Mr. Fisalis more.

“And would you care to tell me what you two are doing all alone in a place like this?” Mr. Fisalis had no sooner reached us than he charged over to Bellis, looking like he was about to grab him.

Did he only just roll out of bed? His hair is a mess. He’s gone from being just fiendish to looking literally possessed. And what did he mean by that, ‘the two of you’? There’s three of us here: Mimosa, Bellis, and I.

“Is something the matter, Mr. Fisalis? It’s not just the two of us—Mimosa’s here, too.” I calmly informed my fuming husband in a tone that I hoped also conveyed, ‘you need to chill.’

“Mimosa? Wh—oh.” As he slowly drew his gaze away from Bellis towards the two of us and confirmed with his own eyes that Mimosa was indeed present, he stopped his advance upon the gardener, realizing his error.

“You’ve misunderstood, Mr. Fisalis. Mimosa, Bellis, and I are merely having a tea break, and Bellis is giving me back a bouquet I left in the greenhouse.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Why did you think it was just Bellis and I here in the first place?”

“When I looked out my window after I woke up, it looked like you and Bellis were chatting and cuddling in the garden... I couldn’t see Mimosa because the trees were blocking my view from the window,” he explained awkwardly, his eyes looking everywhere except at us.

We weren’t cuddling! We weren’t even sitting close to each other. There’s a person-sized space between us filled with dishes. He must have seen us from an angle up in his window.

“You came charging over because you thought we were... cuddling.”

“...Yes.”

Talk about jumping to a conclusion. And, wow, déjà vu, too. You’ve got to be kidding me! Are you seriously doing this again?

I can’t grill him like that out loud, though.

“...Er, I told you this exact thing yesterday, but I’ll tell you again today. Bellis isn’t trying to seduce me.”

“Huh?” The side of Mr. Fisalis’ mouth twitched; it was *his* turn to experience déjà vu. It appeared he was not sure what for, though.

Argh, not again!

“Good grief. I didn’t think I’d have to explain this a second time, but were you unaware that Bellis and Mimosa are married, too?”

“What? Bellis and Mimosa are...?” he muttered what sounded suspiciously like ‘I had no idea,’ and slumped down on the lawn like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

For heaven’s sake. Do you know about any of the couples around here? I turned my eyes upward in exasperation.

“We got married after you stopped living in the main house, Master, so...” Just like yesterday, Bellis tried to give Mr. Fisalis the benefit of the doubt. I didn’t think he did a very good job of it, though.

“Bellis’ love for Mimosa is more than simple desire; he adores her—he’d never look at anyone else! You know what, Mr. Fisalis?”

“Wh—what?” he asked, looking up at me from where he was kneeling.

“You’re completely ignorant about what goes on in your own manor! Just like yesterday!”

“Huh!?”

“You’re the head of the household, so maybe—no you *need* to take your role more seriously!” I said to him sternly, even a little angrily.

“Uh...” his handsome face twitched.

Worried that perhaps I had said too much too forcefully, I changed my tone to something gentler.

“I know you’re busy, but please try to pay attention to what goes on in this house. I might not be able to do much, but I put a lot of effort into this place,” I told him with a smile.

“If you say so, I will. I’ll do a better job from now on,” he responded, his stiff expression softening into a grin.

Oh, I see signs of growth! It must be the pressure of the servants’ expectation that I’ll return Mr. Fisalis to how he used to be. This was an opportunity!

“Thank you. We’ll do a better job together, a little at a time. Oh, I know. Would you care to join us for tea, Mr. Fisalis? You’ve been asleep for so long, you must be famished.” I smiled warmly and offered him my hand.

“I think I will.”

Mr. Fisalis took my hand with hesitation; I pulled him to his feet and over to where we sat among the dishes on the quilt. The honest, not-for-show smile he flashed at me was a sight for sore eyes. Taking a seat on the aforementioned quilt, he patted the spot next to himself as he looked up at me.

He wants me to sit there.

So I didn’t hesitate to sit right down.

Once everyone had made themselves comfortable, Mimosa offered to make more tea and, following her lead, Bellis headed to the kitchen to let them know they should bring Mr. Fisalis’ breakfast outside.

I totally saw the two of them exchange a knowing smile! It warms my heart to see my friends so in tune with each other.

“It’s so nice to just relax outside with some tea like this. Too bad I overslept, though,” Mr. Fisalis commented as he leaned back on his hands and looked up at the sky, like he was in a photoshoot or something.

“The weather is beautiful today, isn’t it?” I replied. I felt so at ease, myself, perhaps because of the weather, too.

This feels like the first time I’ve sat and just talked to him. I don’t know if it’s the weather, but I really don’t mind being here with him.

“Ugh, my body feels like it weighs a ton. I slept for much too long,” he said with a snicker.

“Your eyes would probably fuse shut if you slept any longer. I know what you mean though, about oversleeping. The beds here are just far too comfortable.”

“You’re right about that. They’re nothing like the places I slept on my trip. Thankfully, now that I’ve had a chance to sleep, I’m not exhausted at all anymore,” he said, stretching out on the quilt.

“That feeling of sinking into the comforting cradle of the springs, and the faint, fresh scent of soap on the linens! Laying in bed on fresh sheets makes all the elbow grease involved in doing the laundry worth the while!” The springs were indeed amazing, but I didn’t mention how I sometimes cannonballed into bed. It didn’t seem very ladylike.

“Elbow grease? Doing the laundry?” Mr. Fisalis murmured absentmindedly, head tilted to one side, when I brought up the bed linen. I knew at once that I’d said something I shouldn’t have.

Oh nooo, I just revealed that I’ve been doing the laundry!

“Er, uhm, I mean, it must take a lot of elbow grease when the servants do the laundry for us! Ah ha ha ha!”

Gosh, I hope he believes that explanation!

“Er, I’m sure they do,” Mr. Fisalis replied, but still with a slight look of doubt at my reaction.

“Your tea is ready,” Mimosa said at just the right time, sparing me from further questioning. *Nice save, Mimosa!*

Just then, Bellis came striding back toward us from the main house, plates in hand.

“I’ve brought your breakfast.”

Once Mimosa and I had arranged the dishes and silverware on the quilt, the mood flipped from relaxation to meal time.

“Looks delicious.” Mr. Fisalis beamed at me, although he still seemed to be watching how I reacted.

Crisis averted, phew! I got too caught up in the conversation. I’ll have to be more careful to not let anything slip!

I sat next to Mr. Fisalis and had some more of Mimosa’s tea as he made short work of his sandwich, one of Cartham’s specials.

A gentle breeze blew across my face. It was a very pleasant afternoon.

...I had absolutely no idea that the servants were scattered all over the manor and grounds, watching over us.

11 — The Invitation

That night:

I was relaxing in my room after dinner when there was a flurry of knocks on my door. Mr. Fisalis poked his head in.

“Viola! Will you go out somewhere with me tomorrow?”

Evidently, he had come specifically to invite me to go out.

“Hm? An outing?” I nearly fell from where I was seated on my sofa. I caught myself on the armrest in the nick of time, blinking in surprise. I was the only one who was caught off guard, though—Dahlia continued to prepare tea, and Mimosa my bath, as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

When did this become the new normal? Anyone?

“Yes. I was just thinking that it would do us good to get out of the house every once in a while.” No sooner had he glided across the room on his long legs than he took it upon himself to sit down next to me and present me with one of his classic smiles. I swear I could see little stars twinkling around him when he did. If his smile was any brighter, I would have needed sunglasses.

‘Once in a while’? More like ‘for the first time ever.’ Just because he asked me to go on an outing after all this time, however, didn’t mean that I could answer with, ‘Who was it, again, that you went out with before?’

“There isn’t anywhere I particularly want to go, though, unless...” What can I say—I like staying home. Curious why he was suggesting we go out now of all times, I tilted my head.

“No, I mean...you haven’t gone out since you arrived here, right? And there are so many confectionery shops and esteemed restaurants out there, all serving food that I’ve heard is absolutely delicious, that we should go see!” he went on enthusiastically, even though I gave zero indication of any interest.

I don’t particularly care about some fancy restaurant. If I don’t like

gastrointestinal warfare at home, what makes you think I'd like it somewhere else? Besides, I'm perfectly satisfied with Cartham's creations. If I'd go anywhere, it should come as no surprise that I'd prefer to pick up some affordable, fresh food at a market. But then again... I have to admit that a confectionery stop does have a certain appeal.

"Hmmm..." I murmured, considering the sweet allure of this potential confectionery shop. Mr. Fisalis didn't fail to notice, either.

"Our destination tomorrow can be a surprise. Mimosa, I want you to show me your best work when you get Viola ready," he directed her. I guess he took my silence as agreeing with him, because he had apparently decided for himself that we would go on an outing with zero input from me.

"Yes, sir!" Mimosa gleefully accepted the request (of how to dress me, like I was a doll or something) and answered with a grin that spanned from ear to ear.

It looks like all the votes that mattered have been counted, and we're going on an outing, then. Roger that.

"Alright, tomorrow, then."

"...Okay. Sleep well." I bid him a good night as he retired to his own room, having just decided for me what I was going to do the next day.

But just before he reached my door, he suddenly turned back and said, "I'll be sure to wake up at a reasonable time," glancing between somewhere in my direction and out the door.

What does he think he's sneaking a peek at?

"Okay, then I'll let Cartham know so he can make the necessary arrangements for breakfast. Unless, you're going to wake up earlier than usual? In that case, I'll inform Rohtas..."

In either case, don't hesitate to have Rohtas knock on your door to wake you up!

Mr. Fisalis effortlessly nipped my response in the bud, however, replying, "...No, I was going to wake up at my usual time..." before shuffling off to his

room. I watched him go until he made it to his room, then returned to my own.

I've got to plan for tomorrow with Mimosa, now.

"What is he thinking, just deciding that we're both going on an excursion tomorrow?" I muttered, mulling over what Mr. Fisalis could possibly have had in mind.

"It sounds like a date! Master and you at the confectionery, it's D-A-T-I-N-G!"

"Are you serious? A *date*?" I squawked from my place on the sofa as Mimosa playfully urged me on.

"What should we do about a dress? Nothing too formal, of course. Let's go with something tidy and youthful, appropriate for a young married woman. I had better rally the troops right away! Master wants to show his wife off to the whole world! This is the perfect call to arms." She managed to get excited all on her own, with exactly zero input from me, too.

Someone, please stop her!

"Er, Mimosa. I don't really want any spa treatments first thing in the morning."

Alas, my pleas were in vain—no one else was going to stop her, so I had to do it myself. It seemed like I chose the wrong course of action, however, because she replied with a pleasant, "If we can't do anything in the morning then, let's start right now!"

"No, that's not what I—Mimosa? Mimosaaa!"

Lost deep in her own world, Mimosa didn't register that I did not want *any* spa treatments *at all* and sped out of my room to summon the Spa Squad.

"No, wait!" I called futilely as I watched her disappear down the hall.

"Mimosa truly puts her heart and soul into serving you, Madam, so please allow her to do so."

"You're missing the point!"

Dahlia said it with a strained little smile, but I can tell she meant 'let's get you cleaned up for Master.' Her powers of persuasion are like nothing else.

Mimosa returned a moment later, and I was thoroughly primed and polished from head to toe courtesy of the Spa Squad, after which I slept very soundly.

The next day:

“Oh, wow! Your skin is so supple and smooth!”

“You’re right, it is!” I stared, fixated, into the mirror as Mimosa looked on from behind me with an expression of self-satisfaction.

Our plan was for me to have breakfast with Mr. Fisalis (who had managed to wake up at a reasonable time), get ready, and then go out. Mimosa selected a pale violet dress for me to wear about the town. Its refined silhouette made my lanky body look so elegant and put-together! I didn’t wear any extravagant jewelry, since I wasn’t going to a party or anything, but instead opted for a pretty choker made with purple stones arranged in a gradient. I wore my hair in a half updo for a more casual look.

Nothing about my appearance was too complicated, but I turned out really looking the part of an elegant young wife!

“You did it, again, Mimosa!” I praised her as I looked at what was practically a stranger staring back at me in the mirror.

“There wasn’t much that needed improving to begin with. All I had to do were a few touch-ups here and there,” I watched her reflection say.

There’s no need to be so humble, Mimosa!

Now dressed, I was about to head to the entrance when Dahlia said, “Take these with you, Madam,” and handed me two small packets of medicine.

“What are these for?”

“For when you find yourself in trouble,” Dahlia answered with an unusually stern look.

“In trouble?” *What does she mean by that?* Confused, I tilted my head.

“Yes, Madam. When do you suppose you might find yourself in trouble while you are with Master?”

“...I think I understand.” I sniffed the sachet; it smelled like a certain medicine from a certain incident.

Sure enough, it's the dried and ground up leftovers of the medicinal herb Mr. Fisalis had brought me from the Royal Medicinal Garden when I was stricken with my last bout of gastrointestinal distress. Dahlia wants me to take it with me, to prevent that disaster from happening again. If it did happen again, I'd be toast if the servants weren't around!

Once she was certain that I understood what she meant, she pointed to one of the packets and said, “Take one of them here before you go, just in case. If you run into trouble, take the remaining one then.” Then she showed me how to take the medicine.

It's important to take the correct dose in the correct way!

“Got it!” I said, nodding, looking her squarely in the eye before I mixed the contents of one of the packets with some water and drank it there.

Yuckkk, it's bitter.

Mr. Fisalis was already at the entrance when I arrived, ready and waiting for me. He was wearing a black shirt under a light gray jacket, white knee-length breeches, and boots the same shade of gray as his jacket. The ensemble was absolutely chic. His everyday knight's uniform was impressive, for sure, but because his civilian outfit that day was so restrained, his natural beauty stood out even more. The snug fit of the clothes on his sinewy frame showed off every square inch of his toned body. He didn't hide the shape of his body like I did, but instead used it to enhance the cut and design of his clothes. It was a subtle difference, but it made a big impact.

I might as well be wearing a potato sack, darn it! As dressed up and made up as I am, I still feel awkward at the thought of being compared to him. Nice clothes and hair can't hold up against someone like him when you're not that pretty to start with.

I wanted to shut myself back in my room, but Mr. Fisalis didn't seem to notice.

Oh, no. Maybe I should have turned him down after all.

I was consumed by negative thoughts, being rather put off by how amazing he looked, but when Mr. Fisalis spotted me, he said, “Well now, you look even more beautiful than ever! I should have known I’d never stand a chance against you, no matter what I wear.” He flashed me a smile. All the sulky voice in my head could say, however, was that he was a fibber, and I was the one who never stood a chance.

I shouldn’t have expected anything less from my own inner narrator. It’s not like Mr. Fisalis can hear it, anyway.

“Why don’t we get going then?” he asked, all too happy to walk next to me as my escort.

Although it was a bit embarrassing for him to suddenly start treating me like a proper lady (er, wife?), I replied, “Yes, let’s go,” and wrapped my hand around his arm.

12 — A Date Out on the Town

A carriage bearing the Fisalis family crest pulled up to the entrance. Mr. Fisalis helped me in before taking the seat across from me, and off we went.

“So where are we going today?” I asked him once the carriage started to move and I could hear the sound of hooves on cobblestone.

“It’s a secret,” he responded, dodging my question.

“Oh, is it?” I mean, I’m fine with whatever, but if he had asked where I wanted to go, I wouldn’t have hesitated to say the confectionery shop!

I wonder where we’re going... this carriage must be top notch; it barely jolts or shudders at all... it’s almost rocking me to sleep, I thought to myself as I gazed out my window at the shops and the people walking along the street. There was a break in the crowd, and the carriage came to a halt in front of a shop.

The massive stone storefront practically screamed “no poor people allowed!” *That must be why this place looks so empty,* I decided for myself.

Then Mr. Fisalis said, “We’ve arrived at our first stop,” before taking my hand and helping me out of the carriage.

And there it was—I saw the sign as soon as I got out.

Haute Couture de Fleur. The store that made my gowns.

I’ve lived in the capital from the time I was born. I’ve passed by this place a million times before. Granted, I was on foot then, not in a fancy carriage, and I never once actually went inside. Not that I’m bragging or anything.

“M—Mr. Fisalis?” I balked at the sight of all the employees and Madame Fleur herself lined up in front of the shop to greet us, and reflexively gripped Mr. Fisalis’ hand tighter. I guess my reaction satisfied him, because he lightly patted my hand as if to soothe me.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking a peek in the shop from time to time, right? And they don’t just make evening gowns here either—they do everyday

clothes, too. And they have plenty of ready-to-wear clothes, as well. Let's just browse," he said with a gentle smile, although browse obviously also included 'and let me buy you something.' *I don't need anymore cloothes. Especially more gowns. Especially.*

Does he even look at the price tag before he says, "sure, let's buy this one?" I suppose it's no big deal considering his family's fortune, but it makes me—someone who still thinks like a commoner—want to cry.

"Another gown?" I asked, looking up at him.

"We have lots of casual clothes! And not just clothing—a wide range of accessories to choose from, too. It's quite chaotic out here, so why don't you come inside?" It was not Mr. Fisalis who answered me, but Madame Fleur, who then gracefully ushered us into the shop.

"I guess it can't hurt" With that, I relented.

Walking past all the smiling shop staff members who came to welcome us made me feel like I was walking down a red carpet; after that, I passed through the door and into my very first luxury boutique.

"What sort of gown are we making today?" the madame inquired.

"Hmm, preferably one that enhances Viola's natural beauty. I trust your skills, Madame," Mr. Fisalis replied.

"Oh ho ho ho! You flatter me, Duke Fisalis! It's an honor to be able to dress someone as lovely as your wife. The violet gown I made for her earlier was so well-received that I was flooded with orders for gowns of the same style, don't you know."

"You don't say! I'm glad to hear that. Viola makes for an excellent model!"

"She does indeed. I'd quite like to make Viola my walking billboard. The same went for your mother, Duke. "

Madame Fleur practically glided over the floor as she showed us around the shop. The innermost part seemed to be for receiving customers. There, no sooner had the two of us sat down on a lavish sofa than tea was brought to us

and the ominous (at least to me) conversation above unfolded between Mr. Fisalis and Madame Fleur.

Oi, I'm right here, Mr. Fisalis. You think you're gonna have another gown made? How many times do I have to tell you? My closet is... My apologies. I'm rambling. Please omit this part.

What are they talking about, though, with models and billboards? I'm the one who wore the darn thing! There wouldn't have been any formal makeup or a gown if they weren't on me! Please remember, I'm just an ordinary girl! At any rate, if I stay quiet any longer, I'm going to end up with another gown I don't need! I've got to change the subject here.

I pulled myself together and waited for a lull in their conversation to address Mr. Fisalis.

"Mr. Fisalis? I saw some lovely shirts on display back there... What did you think of them? I thought they'd look great on you."

A stylish black silk shirt had caught my eye as I was walking through the shop. The price was not important to me; this was merely a tactic to shift the focus from myself to Mr. Fisalis.

"You did?"

"Yes! You must not have much time to go shopping for yourself, since you're so busy, right? I know you don't get many chances to wear casual clothes, but that's exactly why I'd like to buy you something nice! Now's your chance!"

I felt like I was one of the employees myself, even going as far as to tack on a million-dollar smile.

"We came to look at clothes for *you*, not me. But if you think I ought to give it a try..." he protested, but not wholeheartedly.

Okay, one more to go!

"Let's go look at it! What do you say, Madame?" I nudged.

"Go right ahead. And if you have the time, feel free to try it on as well," she told us, providing me with the backup I desperately needed.

I got up from the sofa and tugged on Mr. Fisalis' hand.

“Alright, let’s see it...” he said, finally getting up and heading with me back into the main area of the shop.

I had successfully flipped the conversation from getting a dress for me to a shirt for Mr. Fisalis.

Mission accomplished!

“This is the same shirt as before, just in a different color. But even a simple change of color gives it an entirely different feeling,” Madame Fleur explained.

“This color suits you, too. You could use a second look in your wardrobe, as well.”

“Really? Alright then. I’ll take this one,” he said, passing the shirt to the madame.

“Of course. Oh, if I may make a suggestion, this style of shirt would actually pair better with these trousers than the ones you are wearing now,” Madame Fleur said as she brought over a pair of pants from another display case.

A true saleswoman!

“Having another style of pants makes for more possible outfits. They would make a nice addition to your wardrobe since they’re so different from what you’re wearing now.”

“You’re right. If you insist, Viola.”

He handed those to Madame, too. In the end, Mr. Fisalis picked out the shirt I’d suggested for him, along with another in a different color and style. But seeing as he also bought another pair of pants, and a jacket on top of that... I can’t say he was actually interested in a new look as much as simply splurging.

Hold on a second. Now that I think about it, all I accomplished with redirecting the conversation was making him waste more of his money.

What have I done!? I used him in my own effort to not let him spend money on me! What has become of me!?

At least he spent his money on himself. Yeah, I’ll go with that logic. Treating yourself is worth something, right? Okay, now I’m settled.

“Thanks for picking these out for me, Viola. I’m really happy,” he said with another dazzling smile, even though the only thing I had actually picked for him myself was the first black shirt. The rest had been him following Madame Fleur’s suggestions. Sure.

“You are? That’s great. Ah heh heh heh.”

I don’t have Mimosa’s fashion sense—not even close—and I don’t see how you could go wrong with a plain black shirt. I mean, who doesn’t look good in a black shirt?

“If you’re satisfied, why don’t we get going?”

We loaded his parcels into the carriage, then got in ourselves. Shortly thereafter, we arrived at our next destination.

“The former head chef at the Royal Palace opened this restaurant after he retired,” Mr. Fisalis explained to me after we disembarked in front of a famous, high-end eatery. Even the royal family were known to visit in secret. I wasn’t sure what to say to him.

You must have to pay big bucks to eat here, considering who runs the place and the kinds of customers he attracts.

And yes, I used to walk by this place all the time, too. No, wait... I was always too intimidated to even walk on this side of the street, actually.

The restaurant was, in fact, a former noble’s remodeled villa and gave off strong ‘invite-only’ energy. The stylish black marble around the doorway imbued the building with a certain intimidation factor, as if to scare off the common plebs. It seemed like I was the only one getting this impression, though—Mr. Fisalis’ expression suggested this was nothing out of the ordinary to him.

He’s the living embodiment of rich kid syndrome.

“We’ve been expecting you... Duke Fisalis. Duchess,” said a man dressed like a butler as he silently swung open the wrought iron gate. I had no idea how long he had been there for. He was handsome, though, with short blond hair combed back smooth and shiny. He was older than Mr. Fisalis, maybe around Bellis’ age. His voice was low and easy on my ears.

...Argh, this is no time to be ogling some guy in butler cosplay. We must have a reservation if he said he's been waiting for us.

"Oh!" I accidentally said out loud, suddenly realizing something...

"What's the matter?" Mr. Fisalis asked me with a look of surprise.

"Oh, er, nothing. My apologies."

He gave me a puzzled look.

So that's what that was for.

The reason Dahlia had given me that medicine before I left the manor (or more accurately, when I was still hiding in my room) finally hit me.

She and the other servants knew I'd be eating out today. That's why she'd had me take that medicine beforehand, and then also bring more with me. She must have anticipated that I'd have stomach problems.

I felt my eyes begin to water at their consideration for me.

"What are we waiting for? You're going to love the food here, I'm sure of it!" Mr. Fisalis encouraged me, gallantly leading the way.

"I love *Cartham's* food..." I mumbled back.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"No?"

Whatever kind of food it was, the restaurant was prepared for my sensitive stomach (you might even say they took measures to avoid all-out intestinal war) and brought me my food in small portions... but it was still luxury cuisine. The *pinnacle* of luxury cuisine, even.

I certainly couldn't complain about the taste, but I found myself in a tricky situation where I needed to take the rest of my medicine.

I finally saw my chance when Mr. Fisalis looked away for a split second while my stomach was still under a ceasefire: I poured the powder into my glass of water and downed it. I don't think he noticed a thing.

I made it through the danger zone without a hitch and finished my meal.

I was starting to feel like going home, but Mr. Fisalis seemed to have other plans and smilingly announced, “Onwards to our next stop.” Was there no escape?

Ugggh, not anoth— Oops. No sneak preview of my true thoughts for you.

The next place we went was a jewelry shop, but not the one that had made all my previous accessories. Apparently this place was popular with young people.

By ‘young people,’ I mean wealthy young people, of course.

I’m getting tired of this ‘going out’ thing. How much does he wanna spend in one trip? I already have a boatload of jewelry, and he still wants to buy me more.

“Viola, this ring is really cute. Why don’t you try it on?”

“It sure is, but I have enough rings already.”

The ring Mr. Fisalis showed me was dripping with gemstones and sure to get in the way when I did the laundry or the cleaning, so I responded with immediate rejection.

“Oh, alright. What about a necklace, then?”

“I just got a new one for the last soiree, remember?”

“Hmm, earrings?”

“A pair were made to go with the necklace.”

“Er, then what about—”

“Oh, I think I see some nice cufflinks over there.”

As stubbornly—er, *ardently* as he tried to show me this and that, I managed to redirect his eyes to a cufflink display in another showcase. Another strategic topic switch successfully deployed. *The tides have turned against you once more, Mr. Fisalis. You’re going to buy yourself something whether you planned to or not.*

He looked towards where I had indicated and said, “Oh, you’re right.”

Unfortunately he gave the cufflinks only a passing glance before returning to the women’s section.

“But *those* will look great with the shirt you’re wearing today! And I bet they’ll also look nice with the new ones you bought, too!” I pressed on. *Great, I sound like I work here, now!*

“Would you like to try them on?” The owner of the store who had been showing us around finally broke his silence, providing me with some much-appreciated support.

Sir or Madam, I won’t turn down help when I need it!

“If you think I should, Viola...” Mr. Fisalis agreed somewhat reluctantly, picking up the cufflinks and putting them on.

The cufflinks were of a simple style, which meant they not only went well with the shirt he was wearing, but would probably go equally well with most shirts.

Less! Is! More!

“They look great! But I bet everything looks great on you, Mr. Fisalis.”

What am I saying? I’m gonna give real sales clerks a run for their money!

“You think so?”

It looked like Mr. Fisalis was no match for my skills on the salesroom floor here, either.

And so Mr. Fisalis bought himself a pair of cufflinks that he quite suddenly found himself drawn to. Store number two, down!

Our next stop was a members-only cafe. It was very obvious that everyone there was rich, and it made me feel uncomfortable.

I’m certain he said that he’d take me to a trendy confectionery shop, so how did we end up at a cafe with such elite regulars? This doesn’t make any sense.

I like the tea that Dahlia and Mimosa make for me just fine, I immediately started to whine internally.

By the time we finally returned home, it was well into the evening.

He... he never took me to the confectioner’s, I moped with a distant look in my eyes as I stepped into the entryway.

Rather than going on a date, I felt like I just spent the day doing things that only Mr. Fisalis liked. Had I been some starry-eyed romanticist, maybe I would have gotten a kick out of our VIP-only date, but alas, I am but a penniless realist. The amount of money I saw flying around on that trip was mind boggling. There was no way I could have enjoyed myself.

Mr. Fisalis, on the other hand, was happy as a clam from start to finish. His brain must be wired differently than mine. Like, fundamentally.

“I had so much fun today,” he told me once we were inside. *Yup, as a clam.*

“Oh, that’s good. I’m glad to have gone with you,” I said back, although I couldn’t honestly say that I had enjoyed myself. I mean, I was utterly *wiped out* after all that. I scolded myself for being so easily exhausted and forced myself to smile.

“You really don’t care for dresses and jewelry or five-star meals, do you?” His face went from one of joy to one clouded in worry as he gazed at my own tired expression.

Oh, so now you notice!? Who was it, again, that decided I liked those things in the first place? Taking someone on a date without asking what they even like is a bit weird, isn’t it?

Suddenly overcome by a rush of exhaustion, I let my fake smile drop and replied honestly, “No, I don’t.”

“I had a feeling you didn’t,” Mr. Fisalis said with a sad smile.

Was I too direct?

Worried that I’d said too much, I peered into his dark, beautiful eyes. They quickly softened and he said, “I’ll have to conduct more thorough research next time, then. Let’s give this a second try later.” He wanted to give it another shot, even though he had failed the first time.

But what does he mean by ‘research’?

“Okay...” I replied half-heartedly. It couldn’t hurt to give him one more chance to impress me, right?

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 1: Reflections of Husband — from Cercis' Perspective ◆ ◆ ◆

I had planned out the whole affair, expecting to unwind around town with Viola, but her reaction suggested she was displeased. I thought I'd buy her something to wear around the house, so I took her to Madame Fleur's boutique... but I ended up only buying things for myself. Then, when we went to a popular jeweler's, she said she didn't need any new jewelry either—and here, too, I only made purchases for myself.

It was so odd. I only wanted to buy her a gift.

I learned today that gifts that any other girl would be delighted to receive somehow do not appeal to Viola. I genuinely liked the shirt she picked out for me, though, and the cufflinks, although simple, will add a touch of elegance to anything I wear. I quite...no, *rather* liked those, too. It would appear she has good taste.

I'm glad that I was able to learn her preferences today. She is unlike any other girl I've ever known. Indeed, I think there will be many times where we don't see eye to eye.

I'll reflect on how I can better consider her feelings and preferences going forward and shall commence research at once. I *will* understand exactly what you like, Viola!

First, I will have to gather intel from those closest to her: Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa. It makes me green with jealousy to think of it, but they spend more time with her than I, and so probably know things about her that I do not. Time is of the essence; the mission starts now.

«Dahlia's Statement»

I called the head maid, Dahlia, into my office for questioning first.

She's level-headed, so I ought to be able to get some objective information from her.

“What sort of things does Viola like?”

“You wish to know about Madam’s personal preferences?” I could see the shock written plainly across her face; I was the last person she expected to ever ask such a question. Her sharp eyes opened ever so slightly wider.

“I do, yes.”

“What is it you’d like to hear about?” She schooled her expression just as I thought she would and inquired further about my intent.

“Anything at all. Er, rather, let’s start with her hobbies.”

“Her hobbies... I am inclined to say that she does not have any in particular. However, she does seem to enjoy cleaning and decorating.” Dahlia raised her hand to her mouth in a loose fist as she contemplated Viola’s general habits, answering carefully.

There are certainly more flowers and greenery both inside and outside the manor since Viola arrived, and I’ve noticed some handmade throw pillows and duvet covers, I recalled.

“I see. Has she expressed interest in anything else?”

“Cooking, I suppose. She often watches the cooks in the kitchen.

Now that she mentions it, they’ve been serving regional cuisine for some time. I seem to recall that being Viola’s idea, too.

“Noted. Thank you for your time.”

Intelligence gathered from Dahlia pointed to Viola enjoying cleaning and cooking.

«Mimosa’s Statement»

The next person I spoke to was the person closest to Viola—her personal maid, Mimosa. We never interacted much so I did not know a lot about her, but she seemed like a nice girl.

I never imagined she was married to that brute, Bellis. Married people ought to be more obvious about the fact that they’re married! Look how it turned out for me, jumping to the wrong conclusion in front of everyone!...No, now isn’t the

time to be opening up old wounds.

I fired off at Mimosa the same questions I had asked Dahlia.

“Would you mind telling the kinds of things Viola likes?”

“What Madam likes?” Her already large eyes opened even wider. Her expression was just as easy to read as Dahlia’s.

You never thought I’d ask this, either! Er, I mean, yes.

“Yes, things like... fashion and whatnot.”

I’m sure I’ve heard Viola say that Mimosa recommends this or that when it comes to clothes and beauty, so I’ll ask her about those.

“She prefers tidiness and modesty over glamor, and tends to choose simplicity over flashiness. This goes for everything—clothing, of course, but even food,” Mimosa replied without batting an eye. The answers must have come so quickly to her from all the time she spent with Viola.

“I see, then. Is there anything else?”

“Anything else? She likes flowers, but she seems to prefer more quaint and rustic varieties. She decorates the house with lavish flower arrangements, but puts more subdued, less imposing kinds in her own room.”

Damn! What an embarrassing date I must have seemed to her!...Ah, well, it’s too late now.

“Understood. Thank you for your cooperation.”

So, according to Mimosa, she does not like flashy or eye-catching things and prefers simplicity.

«Rohtas’ Statement»

The butler, Rohtas, was last.

Not a thing in this entire manor gets past him, so I’m sure he possesses both objective and thorough information on Viola.

“What are your thoughts on Viola, Rohtas?”

“Mine, sir?”

“Yes. Objectively speaking, what kind of person is she? You spend more time with her than I do. Tragically.”

Indeed, it is nothing short of a tragedy, but there's not much I can do, seeing as she's at home all day.

The butler appeared to think for a moment before responding.

“That is true, I do. Broadly speaking, she comes from a humble upbringing. She is not drawn to luxury.”

“...I got that impression, yes.”

She wasn't exactly wowed by those expensive dresses or jewelry. In fact, she turned them all down.

“She is very friendly. She opened up to us servants quickly.”

“...She hasn't opened up at all to *me*...”

What's with her? She's still distant with me after all this time.

“It's just a matter of time, Master.”

Did...did Rohtas just look at me with pity!?

“Perhaps it's my imagination, but I don't think time is the only issue...”

“If you think that may be the case, might I humbly suggest that some self-improvement may be in order?”

“Rrgh... That's why I'm talking to you right now. To try to understand her better. I want to see my lovely wife happy.”

“Oh, isn't that a nice thought..”

Was he always this sharp-tongued? I just said that I knew I needed to improve!

“Something else just came to mind, Master.”

“...What?”

“Madam hates wasteful spending.”

Queue more war flashbacks to our terrible 'date.' It's like a knife to the heart!

"You could say she prefers to amass memories rather than physical objects."

Oh, no. Physical objects were all I tried to give her.

I felt the figurative knife twist deeper.

"She feels such things are priceless."

He even had a rebuttal ready!

Everything I did...was precisely what she wouldn't have wanted.

"...Please, do try harder from now on," Rohtas tried to comfort me as I hung my head.

"...I will."

He's right. I can't let this discourage me. But after talking to those closest to Viola, I feel like my heart's been crushed. Nay, I dare say it has been completely shattered since my conversation with Rohtas.

I only did the exact opposite of what she liked! But, don't girls like it when a man's assertive? I guess my research has only made me realize how little I actually know about her.

From now on, I'll take my cues from her. I promise.

13 — More Spending is Not Amending!

My first ever date with Mr. Fisalis was soul-crushingly exhausting, if I'm going to be frank. It wasn't pretty. He didn't have any inkling of what a commoner like me would enjoy.

I went back to my room and let myself flop onto my sofa like a sack of bricks. Every cell in my body was tired.

"Phew...! What a day." I stretched out on the couch, taking a deep breath in an attempt to lift the stagnant feeling hanging over me. Finally, it felt like my blood was pumping again. I had been dragged all around town to places I didn't want to go, growing more and more stressed as the day wore on.

"Did you have a good time today, Madam?" Dahlia asked with a snicker as she handed me a cup of warm herbal tea. I received the cup with both hands and took a moment to savor the aroma. It seemed she had chosen herbs with strong calming properties; I could feel my frazzled nerves being soothed by the gentle, fragrant steam.

"Kind of?" I replied, intentionally vaguely; I was worried a flat 'no' would be inappropriate.

"Are you asking me or telling me, Madam?" she pressed, her stiff smile suggesting that she already knew my real answer.

"I know Mr. Fisalis was trying to do something nice by asking me to go out with him, but we didn't even go to the places I wanted to see and... I don't know. I mean, regular noblewomen would be thrilled to have their husband take them to expensive boutiques and trendy jewelry stores, right? But I'm just not on the same wavelength as rich people, I guess."

"I can only imagine."

"It's like he doesn't know that you can't buy other people's happiness with expensive presents. I pity him, in a sense, having to grow up around people who thought that way. Sorry, that was a little bit forward of me, I suppose."

Well, between their fortune and influence, and in Mr. Fisalis' case, his flawless good looks, rich people really do have a lot going for them. Plus, if he was only ever approached by people who were dazzled by his power or appearance, that had to have had an effect on his sense of values, too.

Meanwhile, someone like me, who never had money, power, or looks to fall back on, has always valued emotional wealth more. Spiritually rich is a good way to put it! Appreciating the little flowers by the side of the road is enough for me. After all, there are far more of those little flowers out there than there are exotic, stunning blossoms! I say we should find happiness in the everyday things! But I suppose that's a way of looking at the world that Mr. Fisalis wouldn't understand.

Dahlia's eyes opened wide, as if something just clicked into place.

"No, what you say is true. You were not out of line in the slightest. In fact, I'm glad that you understand Master so well."

"You are?"

"Indeed." Dahlia nodded fervently.

"Oh! Thank you for that medicine! It definitely got put to good use. You were really prepared for everything, weren't you?"

"I'm pleased to hear that it was effective. Rohtas actually notified me beforehand that Master had made a reservation at that establishment."

"Oh, so he *had* made a reservation. Still, that would've been the end for me if you hadn't helped me out there."

"I'm glad you found it useful. It's my pleasure to serve you in any way I can when you are here at the manor, but it pains me that I can't come to your aid while you're away."

I really can't thank Dahlia enough for her concern!

"I feel the same. The food at that restaurant really was superb, but I have to say... I think I still prefer Cartham's cooking."

"I'm sure he'd be glad to hear that," Dahlia said with a happy grin.

Just thinking of how close the two of them were made me smile as I reached

for my cup of tea. Now that it was cool enough to drink, I had a sip. I felt the day's weariness melt away as the mild taste of the herbs hit my tongue.

Just as I was thinking to myself what a good job Dahlia had done with my tea and I was finally beginning to relax, Mimosa came in and said, "Your bath is ready, Madam. Take it easy for the rest of the day. When you're done, I'll give you a massage to help you unwind."

Could I ever turn down Mimosa's healing touch? Nay, I could not!

And thus when I eventually climbed out of the tub it was straight into the arms of Mimosa's cheery Spa Squad for a full-body massage. *Ahh, heaven... zzz.*

"...Madam. Madam, it's morning..." I could hear Dahlia saying, but she sounded far away. *Am I dreaming?* I wondered groggily, unable to form clear thoughts.

"Nngh... Let me sleep just a little longer..." I begged. I'm sure it sounded more like, *'hfeufh...sdkjfsdgjh...'* to Dahlia, though.

"You've...since...last night..." Dahlia's voice went in and out of focus as my brain pleaded to go back to sleep.

I don't have any special plans for today, so can't I sleep in? You know I always wake up on time otherwise. I'm just really worn out from yesterday...

Cue embarrassing snot bubble.

Just how long have I been asleep?

When I finally opened my eyes, feeling refreshed at last, the sun was already well overhead. I managed to sit up in bed and was staring into space when Dahlia appeared, carrying a tray with a pitcher and cup.

"Ah, you're awake, Madam."

"Good morning, Dahlia. Looks like I succeeded in sleeping in." I took some of the herb-scented water from her and took a drink. The fresh taste moistened my throat and cleared my head. It was so good, I took several deep gulps.

"Er, I tried to wake you at your usual time, but you told me to let you sleep longer, so I let you be. You must have been very worn out from yesterday," she

said with a smile as she poured me more herbal water once I had drained my first cup.

“I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

“Well, it was quite a departure from your regular activities, after all.”

“True.”

“You’ll get used to it soon enough.”

“Oh, no. I don’t think I ever will. Not in my whole life.”

My passionate dismissal only earned me a grim smile from Dahlia.

Finishing my second glass of the herbal water, I handed the cup back to Dahlia and got out of bed. I had no idea what time it was, but since I couldn’t just lie around in my pajamas forever, I headed over to my dresser, where Mimosa was waiting.

The weather was fine; the comforting sunlight spilling from my window drew me over to its warmth, and from that window, I saw it.

“...What’s that?”

The window faced the garden, looking out over the always-beautiful greenery, but something about the view was different that day. Normally, I would see the gardeners working on the grounds—a tranquil sight to wake up to, for sure—but that day, there were many, many more people.

And they were all crowded around the cottage.

As I’ve mentioned before, the cottage was located so it was hidden from the main house—although who decided that, I don’t know. But its placement and the arrangement of the trees around it were planned down to the last detail, hiding it completely from view; that meant when Mr. Fisalis and Miss Calendula were living in it, you would have never known they were there, unless you were some peeping Tom.

To put it nicely, it was a bonus room, of sorts; to put it not-so-nicely, it was a secret clubhouse for cheaters. *Yeah, that’s got to be it. I’m gonna go with it being built with the former purpose in mind.*

Mr. Fisalis has been living in the main house since Miss Calendula left, so why are there all those men over there making such a racket?

They were dressed roughly like gardeners or some other sort of laborers.

Did we always have this many gardeners?

When I asked Dahlia what was going on in the garden, she said, “Master decided to renovate the cottage, for some reason. The builders have been in and out since this morning.”

“Oh, I see. I wonder why he’s renovating it all of a sudden. Was it starting to deteriorate?” *I thought it looked to be in good shape from the outside. Unlike my parents’ house. Sob.*

“No, it’s not that old yet. From what Rohtas told me, they’re moving walls, tearing up the floor, and replacing all the furniture.”

So he’s redoing everything even though it’s still in perfectly good shape? What’s he doing wasting more money? I really don’t get rich people.

“I see.” *There is no understanding that man. Oh well, it has nothing to do with me, so I might as well get dressed and eat something.*

Exactly! I fell back onto my preferred reasoning: that this was not my problem!

“I’ve decided to remodel the cottage. I figured it must harbor a lot of unpleasant memories for you, so I thought I’d just redo the whole place to see if I couldn’t change the vibe,” Mr. Fisalis told me with a big smile when I saw him for the first time that day at lunch.

He’s remodeling it for me—or rather, because of me?

I felt dizzy at what must have been my soul leaving my body in shock at the sheer scale of the project he’d decided to undertake.

I mean, I’m not the one causing the problem here. You are.

I wasn’t just dizzy, I was upset.

Are you using me as an excuse to clear your conscience?

“You didn’t need to do that! It didn’t bother me at all!” I managed to respond,

flustered.

I didn't have any bad memories attached to the cottage, having kept my distance from Mr. Fisalis and Miss Calendula from the get-go. I didn't think about the cottage at all, really.

Mr. Fisalis replied in a calm tone of voice that was completely at odds with how I was feeling myself.

"I just don't want you to be reminded of all the times you were there," he said like this was obvious, although there was a major flaw in his logic.

"But I never did go there. Not even once."

"Oh." He froze for an instant.

How do you forget that? Er, well, there was that one time I accidentally spied on you and Miss Calendula, which is why I can't help but think of the cottage as a love shack.

It didn't take long for him to regain composure and assume a serious expression once more, though.

"Oh, well then... the cottage *itself* will become a bad memory. Yes. So, uh, we might as well rebuild it, right?" he mumbled.

Did I hear him right? Did he just say 'rebuild'?

"Oh, nonononono, you don't need to *rebuild* it! It doesn't hold any bad memories, so please, just limit yourself to remodeling!" I pleaded, clinging to his clothes.

"But, this way you won't have to..." he persisted.

Argh, he is so stubborn! Do I have to spell it out for him? IT'S. NOT. NECESSARY.

"I'm fine with it as it is! Rebuilding it will only stress me out!"

Stop blowing your money on stupid stuff!

"If you insist, then. Have it your way. I can always fill it with new memories of my time with you..."

"Good! Then we can finally eat now! Our food's gotten cold!"

What was up with him getting snippy all of a sudden? Oh well, at least now I can have my lunch! Why are you hanging your head like that, Mr. Fisalis?

Mr. Fisalis went back to the cottage to oversee the work, saying he wanted to give the directions himself. He asked me if I wanted to come along, but I politely turned him down.

“He didn’t have to go and remodel the cottage. Like, how much does he have to spend before he’s satisfied? What will happen if his family’s financial situation goes downhill? I’m sure that would never happen, but I still think he should consider his family before he acts.”

“...You seem to have a lot on your mind, Madam.”

“Did I say that all out loud? Wehhh.”

“You did.” Rohtas only roasted me with the utmost care. “There’s no need to worry about a minor expense like that plunging us into financial ruin...” he added, just as calmly.

“There isn’t? But still, I don’t think he should have decided to renovate the cottage all on his own.”

“He is the head of the family; therefore he can do as he pleases with the manor. He has already told his father that he’s welcome to stay in the cottage when he comes to visit.”

Was that Mr. Fisalis’ idea or his father’s? The work began very quickly, after all.

“I think I understand.” *Please, do whatever you want.*

Rohtas let out a soft chuckle at my defeated expression.

“Think of this as his way of atoning, and do with that what you will,” he followed up.

Rohtas may say it’s atonement, but I honestly don’t think all that highly of it. I can’t say I understand his logic, either, but I’ll let Mr. Fisalis go until he’s happy, like Rohtas suggested.

14 — The New Cottage

Mr. Fisalis' remodeling of the inside of the cottage—or, as Rohtas called it, his atonement—was done after three days. Mr. Fisalis was home on vacation for the first day of renovations and as such insisted on personally overseeing all the work, hanging around the work site with all the eagerness of a child at a candy store. His vacation ended on the second day, however, forcing him back to work; he also fell back into his old routine of going straight to the cottage when he came home, this time to check on its progress.

"Let him do as he pleases," Rohtas, and all the other servants for that matter, implored me as they watched him attentively. I watched too, of course, but had far less to say.

"Renovations are complete! Come see the inside," Mr. Fisalis invited me, having heard from Rohtas that work on the cottage had ended when he arrived home that evening. Apparently he had already confirmed for himself that everything was finished, so now he had come back to the manor a second time specifically to invite me to his open house.

"Thank you, I will. Tomorrow." Unaware of how much it had changed, I figured it was no more pressing than if he had simply tidied the house.

Despite my reply that clearly said, 'I don't really care, sooo, I'll just leave that until tomorrow,' he insisted, "No, not tomorrow! We must see it now!" barely giving me time to finish before he shot me down. He then grabbed my hand and all but flew out of the room.

It's almost dinnertime and I don't see why it's so important to rush. I planned to go inspect it with Dahlia and Mimosa sometime tomorrow anyway. I silently pleaded to Rohtas, Dahlia, Mimosa, and the other maids for help as he dragged me along, but none of them would meet my gaze. What's going on?

"Have a good time!" they all said smilingly.

No, that's the last thing I want you to tell me! Somebody, help meee!

If nobody was going to help me, I'd have to try to find a way out myself.

"Wha—What will we do about dinner?"

"Cartham has already been instructed to start dinner when you and Master return, so there's no rush, Madam. Take your time," Rohtas answered with a grin, but that wasn't the kind of response I'd been hoping for!

I don't want to take my time! I'm hungry!

"Alright, see you then," Mr. Fisalis replied with a nod of understanding. Literally no one was on my side.

Why's everyone telling me to 'take my time'? What gives! I just want to get this over with as fast as possible so I can eat!

When at last, having dragged me through gardens and the thicket of trees like a hunting trophy, Mr. Fisalis tugged me over the threshold and into the cottage, the first thing I noticed was that it was cozier and calmer than I'd expected. But then again, since the main house was a public space used to receive company, it was important that it be impressive; the cottage, on the other hand, was a private space, so such pomp and extravagance was unnecessary. For someone like me, with a commoner's tastes, the unadorned feel of the cottage was very appealing.

You didn't need to be a millionaire to be able to tell that the main house was strewn with costly decorations, and since they really didn't seem like something I should touch, I'd always let the maids take care of dusting them when we were cleaning. The display pieces in the entryway were like the face of the house, so they were absolutely exquisite. I had no clue how much they must have cost. I probably couldn't even estimate.

...Oops. Sidetracked again. Back to the cottage.

Not a single trace of those showy decorations was to be found at the newly renovated cottage... to my slight relief, honestly.

Continuing further in, there was a living room, a bedroom, and a bathroom. The dining area off the living room encompassed a small kitchen.

Hmm, I could probably do a little cooking here.

The deck I'd seen earlier—where Mr. Fisalis and Miss Calendula had been cuddling—was gone, with a lush green lawn laid down in its place. Naturally, the sofa that had been on the deck was also gone, replaced by a lovely white wood dining set.

I could see myself eating lunch out here on a nice day.

Everything looked to be of good quality, but also not too showy.

It feels so different here! So serene! It's nothing like how stiff the main house can feel. It feels private and relaxed here.

Although I initially wanted to pass on the cottage tour, somewhere along the way, I found myself stopping to admire this and that, which Mr. Fisalis quietly watched with a smile on his face. When I finally satisfied my newfound desire to look around, he spoke up.

"Well? Is it to your liking?"

"Yes, very much. It's so...calm."

"Excellent! It's a good thing I asked around, then."

"Huh?" *What does he mean, 'asked around'?*

"I asked Rohtas, Dahlia, and the others what kind of things you like."

Whaaat!? When did he do all that research!? That explains why this feels so plain—I mean, ordinary! Like meee! Mr. Fisalis, the same guy who usually just does whatever he wanted without considering me, actually researched my preferences!

Unable to imagine the man I went on a "date" with a few days before doing such a thing, my mouth opened and closed in shock, very much resembling a goldfish.

"I, um. Thank you?"

"Why'd you phrase it like a question? Ah, never mind. From now on, feel free to use this place however you wish. Not just the cottage, either. Everything in the manor is yours now."

"...I think it might take a little while for that to process." *If it does at all.*

As I was looking around even more, my eyes were drawn to a shelf tightly packed with books.

Didn't he say he didn't like books? I mean, speaking for myself, I could spend all day reading, but that's a different story. Upon closer inspection, the books turned out to be a mix of all genres. Just when I thought it was all fairy tales, there would be a detective novel, and then next to that, a travelogue, and then cookbooks, pastry, gardening, and field books.

...Exactly who has this been curated for? Everything seems to be suited for my tastes, but...

As I was looking back and forth across the shelves, I noticed Mr. Fisalis looking at me with big puppy-dog eyes and an expression that screamed, 'tell me I'm a good boy!'

"Is this to your liking, too? I gathered a bunch of things I thought you would like based on what Dahlia and Mimosa told me!"

It was amazing. I couldn't look away.

I haven't read much since I came here, but they must have gathered what I liked from our conversations. Dahlia, Mimosa, you two are regular armchair detectives!

"I can't believe how many there are!" I exclaimed, staring at the rows of multicolored spines.

"There're even more in the manor's main library. You're welcome to take those out, too. And these, of course."

I had no reason to disagree, since he'd said it was alright, so I reached for two that had caught my eye. A mystery novel and a travelogue.

"I'll start with these. Shouldn't we be getting back to the manor? I imagine everyone's waiting for us."

"They probably are. But I think we can still take our time."

I had started to grow hungry, though, like seriously hungry, and convinced him to go back. He held my hand again, too, for some reason. It wasn't like I was going to run away or something.

15 — Viola's No Good Very Bad Day

I returned to the main house with my hand in Mr. Fisalis' after he'd finished giving me the grand tour of the newly renovated cottage. I was super embarrassed to show up at the house holding his hand like that, but he didn't seem to care one bit and wouldn't release me no matter how hard I tried to escape. When we opened the front door, all the servants were lined up to greet us, just like they did when Mr. Fisalis came home from work.

Rohtas grinned and asked, "What did you think of the renovations, Madam?" as I clawed at Mr. Fisalis' iron-clad grip.

"It looked wonderful. Everything turned out very cozy and inviting," I replied, putting a brief hold on my mad rush to free myself.

"I suppose you could say our humble advice was worthwhile in the end," Rohtas replied, eyes smiling.

Once we finished our dinner, albeit a little later than usual, and I had gone back to my room to get ready for bed, I started reading the books I had borrowed from the cottage right away.

"You're absolutely brilliant. Knowing I'd like books like these, even though I never explicitly said so," I told the two maids as I held out the book in my hand, prompting them to turn around.

"I was able to make an educated guess based on our everyday conversations."

"You're always, like, going on about how fun it would be to visit different kingdoms and regions whenever we have foreign cuisine at mealtime."

It made me kind of happy how obvious they both made it seem. Only the sharpest-eyed servants for the Fisalis family!

"You always watch Cartham very closely when he's cooking."

"And you clearly enjoy gardening."

They've been watching over me this whole time! So much that they even

figured out my interests. There were so many hints in what I said and did.

“What did you think of the detective stories and fairy tales, by the way?”

“We were worried you might think those were overly obvious choices.”

Gosh, weren't the cookbooks and travelogues the obvious choices? Besides, I don't think there's anything wrong with taking the easy route, so I can't complain!

“Wouldn't an obvious choice usually be romance novels, though?”

“I didn't think you'd like those kinds of books,” they both said at precisely the same time.

They thought that about me? I'd read anything, even if it was romance, assuming it was popular. I mean, I'm a girl, aren't I? Oh, looks like they inferred that based on what I said and did, too, considering how they're both avoiding eye contact with me.

I might have been just a fainthearted young girl (?), but I accepted that painful truth and said, “Oh... okay...ahem. It seemed like there were still a lot of interesting books, anyway, so thank you.”

“It's Master you should thank,” said Dahlia, brushing off the praise with a smile.

He must have been the one who brought them all here, yeah. I'm grateful he did, though... that he actually thought about me before he went out and got everything. Same goes for the renovations to the cottage. I have one more thank-you to give, then.

“You're right. Well then, I'll read this one tonight before I go to sleep.”

For some reason, I really, really wanted to read that book, so I took it to bed with me.

“There's no need to push yourself and rush through it, Madam,” Dahlia chided me as she lit the candle beside my bed.

“Oh, it'll be fine.” *I'll want to get to bed early, anyway.*

“Sleep well.”

“You too. Good night.”

Mimosa and Dahlia left for their own rooms after we said good night, and I snuggled under my duvet and began to read.

To get straight to the point, it was not, in fact, fine.

—

I blinked weakly against the bright morning sun. The usually gentle, warm sunlight felt like invisible knives slicing into my eyeballs that morning.

I had stayed up all night reading.

I got up more or less at my usual time, but was in no way well-rested. I basically didn't sleep at all.

The travelogue featured faraway lands and foreign kingdoms depicted in lush illustrations, and utterly captivated, I found myself turning page after page as if in a trance. No sooner had I finished than I picked up the mystery novel—only to be drawn into that, too, completely on edge the whole time over various traps and tricks, wondering who the culprit could be. Far from lulling me to sleep, it kept me awake, unable to even think about going to bed until I found out who the bad guy was.

Seeing no reason for me to oversleep despite this, when Dahlia came to rouse me at my usual time, I looked like I had only just woken up (I had) and fumbled my way pathetically out of bed. Everyone would be worried about me, though, if I was stumbling around, so I turned to my iron willpower to cover it up!

...And yet.

“Good morning. Did you... Madam? Did you sleep quite alright last night?” Dahlia inquired in an ever-so-slightly scary tone. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't fool her, and she easily noticed that something about me was off.

“I guess I lost track of time reading my books... Sorry,” I apologized, shrinking in shame as if I was being scolded by Mother. *Have mercy, Dahlia!*

Dahlia sighed in exasperation at me before admitting defeat.

“Nothing we can do about it now. Perhaps you can lie down briefly after breakfast. In the meantime, let's see if some makeup can hide those bags under

your eyes. This is your forte, I believe, Mimosa?" she asked, turning to face Mimosa, who was waiting to pounce half a step behind her.

"Oh, I can certainly fix those."

Mmgh, I'm sorryyy. I promise I won't do it again. I will reflect on my naughty bookworm ways.

I survived breakfast with Mr. Fisalis, even though I was pretty out of it, and managed to show him off to work as was our norm. He set off after our usual exchange of:

"See you this evening."

"Have a great day!"

Phew, he didn't notice I'm like a zombie!

I guess I figured that I'd be in the clear as long as I could get him out the door, because after that, my batteries seemed to drain rapidly. Once I was sure the front door was shut and I was turning on my heel for the salon, an uncontrollable sleepiness suddenly overtook me. Staggering in a drowsy daze, I put out a hand to stabilize myself, but it landed on an ornamental figure that was so obviously worth more than my own parents' house that I had only ever admired from arm's length.

CRAAASH!

It toppled as soon as I touched it, falling to the hard marble floor and loudly shattering into a million pieces.



“Eeee! Madam!”

“Are you alright!?” the servants cried out in a panic.

I, on the other hand, was so sleepy that I could only look around in confusion from my spot crouched on the floor, unable to even get up. With absolutely zero idea of what had just happened.

What happened?, I went so far as to ask myself, stupidly.

“Madam! Are you hurt?” Rohtas asked as he ran over to me, ushering me away from the broken pieces scattered about me on the floor.

Once Rohtas had moved me somewhere safer, I looked back at where he had found me to see; it was absolute carnage, shards of broken vase strewn everywhere! *Huhhh!*? I was so sleepy that at first it was like looking at something that wasn’t real, but then it hit me. I was shocked back to reality with a jolt.

I annihilated that priceless ornament! What am I gonna do!?

“Wh—wh—what do we do, Rohtas? I broke it!” I asked Rohtas, holding my head in panic. I could feel the blood drain from my face in fright. *So much for hiding my pale, sleepless skin with makeup.*

“Not to worry, Madam. ’Twas nothing but a decoration. What’s most important is that you’re unhurt,” he told me soothingly, but that museum-quality vase certainly didn’t look like “just a decoration” to me.

I saw how careful the maids were with it when we were cleaning! So of course I figured out it was priceless and knew not to touch it. But now I’ve gone and broken it, after all the effort and care those maids put into looking after it! How will I ever live with knowing that I destroyed a valuable artifact in a sleep-deprived stupor!?

“No, no, nooo, you can’t just say that was a ‘decoration’! *Aaaaaah*, what am I gonna dooo!?” *And I was always so careful around it, too!*

“Please, calm yourself, Madam. Why don’t we go back to your room for a moment?” Dahlia tried to console me, rubbing my back as I tried to avoid bursting into tears, but I was so shaken up that she wasn’t very successful at it. I

clung to her and Mimosa as they guided me back to my room where I promptly collapsed in a heap on my sofa.

“It wasn’t an heirloom or anything of that sort, so there’s really no need for you to be so upset, Madam,” Dahlia told me as I lay whimpering on the couch.

“That’s not why I’m upset. It’s because everyone says that everything in this house is so valuable,” I replied, referring to what I’d heard from the maids as we had cleaned.

“I’m more concerned about your safety than about any item in this house.”

“I should’ve kept it from breaking even if it meant getting hurt! I’m tough enough, I would’ve been able to, too, but I was absolutely useless... I’ll replace it... I know it was worth a lot of money, but I can probably still buy another, I bet. But that’d mean taking out another loan after I just finally got rid of the old one... *uuungh*,” I whined, not even listening to what Dahlia said.

“No, you really don’t need to do that. Please, calm down,” Mimosa insisted, sighing. I didn’t really hear her, either.

“Buh—But how will I make up for it? Manual labor? Maybe I could go find a job somewhere? Honestly, I’d rather just become a servant...” I mumbled to myself, trying to come up with ways to repay the Fisalis family, when Rohtas returned from cleaning up the mess I’d made.

“It’s nothing you need to worry yourself over, Madam. And certainly not something you need to repay anyone for,” Rohtas said with a stern smile at my continued anxiety.

“But, but...” I continued to sob, to which he let out a single long-suffering sigh.

“I have an idea. Instead of staying here and being upset, why don’t you go back to your parents’ house? It’s been a while since you saw them. Perhaps a change of scenery—and more importantly, spending time with them—will make you feel better,” he suggested.

But I was so depressed at that moment that I misunderstood what Rohtas meant.

“Oh. You mean Mr. Fisalis is going to divorce me...” I replied, assuming the worst. Rohtas only sighed even more deeply.

“No, Madam, I did not. Come now, take a break from all this at your parents’ house, and then come back when you’re feeling better,” he instructed me, speaking slowly and clearly.

I didn’t notice the emphasis on ‘then come back.’

“Okay,” I nodded in agreement, feeling lower than dirt.

I deserve to be divorced at this point. Just my luck that this would happen right after Mr. Fisalis finally showed me that he wanted to get along. I’m the one that made this mess, though, so I can’t get out of it. I had better do as Rohtas says and go home, I thought with a miserable sigh.

“...It’s not as if we’re going to leave you there,” Rohtas muttered with a wry smile. I was so down in the dumps, though, that I didn’t hear him.

16 — Going Home (For Good?)

A carriage was called around to the front of the house and I got into it, feeling very much like I was being sent home and divorce was imminent. My feet felt like they were made of lead.

“This is your first time going home since you arrived, so there’s no need for you to rush back, but we do indeed want you to *come back*, Madam,” Rohtas and Dahlia said, putting extra emphasis on ‘come back’ as they saw me off with smiling faces. I still didn’t have it in me to return the smile, though.

“I know it wasn’t for very long, but thank you for looking after me while I was here...” I replied, as if I was giving a final farewell, only to be interrupted by Rohtas, continuing on, “So, as I have been saying, Madam, we will be expecting you back here tonight, alright?”

“Mimosa, do make sure she’s brought home on time,” he reminded Mimosa, who was going with me, rolling his eyes and looking up at the sky as if hoping for divine intervention.

“Yes, sir! By any means necessary!” Mimosa shouted from behind the pile of my essentials I thought I’d need (now that I had been given the boot) that she was carrying for me.

“You’re only going to be away for a little while before you’re picked up...” Rohtas murmured under his breath, clearing his throat to hide it.

“That’s for certain,” Mimosa nodded back.

Who’s going to pick Mimosa up, I wonder. It’s a shame that the last place I’ll see her is at my parents’ house.

I mean, I would’ve been fine if they sent me alone, but they wouldn’t let me take my overnight bag. Oh, that must be why. They’re going to send all my personal belongings later. I don’t really have that much, even, so they could probably fit it all in one box. I mean, all the clothes and accessories I have right now were provided by the Fisalis family, so that doesn’t leave much else.

I was in a dark place that day. My brain was tuned in to a negative-thoughts-only channel and there was no changing it.

—

This was my first time going home since I'd married into the Fisalis family. I should have been excited, but given the circumstances, my mind was in a weird place.

My old house slowly came into view. Peering out the little window in the carriage door, I was glad to see that my childhood home hadn't cha— Wait, what's that?

"What's the matter, Madam?" Mimosa asked, noticing when I suddenly cocked my head and rubbed my eyes in confusion.

I looked over my shoulder at her and said, "Am I still asleep, Mimosa? Is this really my old house?"

"Er, yes? Did you already forget what it looked like?" she giggled, covering her lips like a proper lady.

"No, it's just, um, really different from how I remember it." I kept rubbing my eyes, but the sight before me didn't change. I decided to try pinching my cheeks next, but...

"Ow, ow, owwww...!" *Why did I do that?* I was most definitely *not* asleep.

"Oh, goodness, Madam, your cheeks are bright red! What were you doing just now?" Mimosa frantically grabbed my hands and pulled them away from my face.

Acting like a weirdo, that's what.

"It's just... our old, rundown house looks completely transformed!" I exclaimed, clenching my fist.

The house I remembered—or rather, the one I last saw—was, to put it nicely, well-loved and substantially proportioned. To put it a little more frankly, it hadn't been very well maintained and was falling apart. It had been in dire need of repair: moss still clung to its stone walls (not enough servants!), and bits of crumbling masonry had never been filled in (not enough money!). And to top it

all off, the whole house had been smothered in ivy. As for the garden, I'd always diligently plucked all the weeds, but it had basically been a bed of grass and wildflowers. A veritable garden of Eden for anonymous, unremarkable flowers.

Now, though...

The moss and ivy had been cleared away, revealing the light gray walls. The eroded areas were no longer visible, having been patched with the same kind of stone. The garden was barely recognizable, now obviously cared for regularly and blanketed with a rich carpet of lush green lawn. It still had wildflowers, to be sure, but now there were a lot more flowers with actual names, too.

Even the window frames, formerly rather shabby-looking with their peeling paint, had been beautifully re-finished. You could tell, even with just a cursory glance, that the whole place had been repaired!

"Woow... I wonder when they had the time and money to put in all this work," I inadvertently said out loud. I was so surprised by the changes that I was in a kind of shock.

"Why don't you ask your family yourself? See, they've all come out to meet you! Oh, it looks like your father is away on the grounds," Mimosa said, snickering at me as I pressed my face flush against the glass of the carriage window. Sure enough, Mother and my siblings were standing in the doorway.

I had been completely out of contact with my family since I got married, so I had no idea what state the house was in. *I could go for a nice, long chat with them, just like Mimosa said.* I pulled myself away from the window and got ready to get out of the carriage.

"Welcome home, Viola. What a surprise to see you so soon! What did you do this time?" Mother said with a smile before quickly turning severe. She wasn't wrong, though; she rarely was. *Ah, yes, the loving voice of one's mother welcoming them home.*



“Grrr, that’s the first thing you say when you see me after so long?” I protested, scowling.

“That’s the only thing I could come up with, so, yes,” Mother nonchalantly replied.

“No surprise, there,” I groaned but, lacking a good comeback, I had no choice but to admit defeat.

“So, what happened?”

“...I broke something expensive.”

“You didn’t!” she exclaimed, putting her hands to her face in a flawless imitation of *The Scream*.

“I know, Mother, I know. Sheesh.”

“You’re usually so prudent, Vi, but every so often... you really mess up, don’t you?” she sighed.

Thanks for the reminder.

“I was half-asleep! I lost my balance and my hand unintentionally landed on a vase, and I knocked it over! So that’s why I’m here, okay? As punishment!” I bawled. “It was really, really expensive though, so can I maybe borrow some money?”

“You want to *what*, Vi!? We don’t have that kind of money! You’ll have to get a job yourself. Use your wages to pay them back.”

Our huddled conversation had just turned to repayment and work when Mimosa interrupted us in a flurry.

“Hold on a moment, you two! There is no punishment or repayment happening! Madam has come home in order to relax and collect herself!”

“Is that true?” Mother replied with record speed, her head snapping up when Mimosa spoke.

“Yes, ma’am! Nothing less, nothing more!” Mimosa insisted. I looked away from her.

“Did you hear that, Vi?”

“She keeps saying that, but they sent me away from the Fisalis estate...”

“It seems like you have nothing to worry about, then. Right?” Mother said, her attitude a complete one-eighty compared to how she had been blowing up at me just moments before.

“...I don’t think I *can* calm down.”

“Which is why you’ve come here to *take a break*,” Mimosa reiterated.

“...I guess I could try to relax, since you’ve gone to the trouble of bringing me all the way here.” Now it was my turn for a complete mood change. Letting my family fawn over me sure seemed preferable to being miserable.

“Come on! Come inside, Vivi!” called my little brother and sister, Thistle and Freesia, breaking their silence to pull me into the house.

They’re so cute, I can’t even! I’m feeling a little better already!

Normally I’d be kept busy with the cleaning and the laundry, but I spent the whole day just resting and relaxing. Mother kept an eye on me as she made lunch in the kitchen with Mimosa while I played with my siblings, read, napped, and generally made the most of my vacation day. The nap was kind of unplanned: I went out to feel the new grass lawn, and it was so soft and fragrant that I fell asleep in the front yard. I must have been really worn out after the chaos from that morning and missing that after-breakfast nap Dahlia had suggested. It was well into the late afternoon when I finally woke up.

“I’m about to start making dinner. Will you help me?” Mother asked on her way to the living room.

Oh yeah, I used to make dinner sometimes, too, before I got married! I was happy to know my mom still made dinner every night.

“Yeah, we can make it together!” I replied enthusiastically. We both headed to the kitchen.

A mother’s cooking has a soothing quality to it. The simple, familiar flavors calmed my nerves even more. We had homemade bread and vegetable soup, along with our main course.

This is a no-struggle meal! This is just how we like to eat in my family!

To that end, I had just tried out some seasoning from the Wahl region earlier that day, back at the manor.

“The house sure has been cleaned up, by the way. When did you find the time?” I asked Mother as we ate, the question on my mind ever since I arrived.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know! Some time after your wedding, aid from the duke started coming in.”

“Aid? You mean like money?”

“Not just money, people. Some came and repaired the house, others cleaned up the garden, all of them, on behalf of the duke. It was all his doing, I understand. A butler called Rohtas oversaw everything.”

I owe Rohtas a... No, wait, it’s Mr. Fisalis I should thank for this!

“That sounds about right. I was blown away when I saw how beautiful they made everything. I’ll have to show Mr. Fisalis my gratitude when I get home.”

“Make sure to tell him that we say thank you, too,” Mother added with a wink.

“You’re even prettier than you were before!” Thistle said, all of a sudden, a grin spreading across his face.

Haha, where did that come from, you silly.

“Yeah! Your dress is really pretty, too!” said Freesia, with breadcrumbs around her mouth.

“Huh?” The compliment was so sudden, I could only stare blankly.

“They’re right. You don’t look anything like you did when you lived here. You were so... so plain, and unsophisticated back then!” Mother added, continuing the train of thought my siblings had started. *Gee, thanks, Mother!* Unfortunately, she wasn’t far off the mark.

“I can thank Mimosa here for keeping me looking good every day. I feel like she makes me sparkle!” As per Euphorbia family tradition, Mimosa was sitting with us as we ate dinner together.

“Is that all there is to it?” replied Mother between bites of food, apparently

unsatisfied with my answer.

“Well, I guess my posture has improved thanks to Rohtas’ dance lessons. Even though sometimes they make me wish for death. And maybe I’ve gotten better at smiling, even when I don’t really feel happy.”

“Aaand?” she pressed on.

“I suppose Dahlia’s etiquette lessons have made me more ladylike, too. Maybe?”

“Oh ho ho ho ho,” Mother tittered knowingly.

Is there something you’d like to add, Mother? Nothing else came to mind, on my part, though, so I just sort of nodded.

Just then, our family butler, Orchis, came into the room.

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt dinner, Madam, Lady Viola, but Duke Fisalis has just arrived.”

“Mr. Fisalis!?”

“Viola! I came as fast as I could when they told me you were here!” Mr. Fisalis appeared from behind Orchis the moment I rose from my chair in surprise. Shocked again, I sat back down. It wasn’t my belongings in a box that they sent, but Mr. Fisalis himself.

What could he possibly be here for?

17 — My Childhood Home

“They said you were fine, but are you absolutely sure that you’re not hurt anywhere!?”

I was so overcome with surprise that I couldn’t even comprehend what Mr. Fisalis was saying.

My ears are telling me that he’s worried, but, really, my mind must be playing tricks on me. He must have come to hand me the divorce papers in person! Why is he looking me up and down, though? Oh well, not relevant. Boy, I really dropped the ball after he took the time to do something nice for me.

I had resigned myself to my (assumed) fate, but not without some sadness.

I suppose this is goodbye to those happy days with all the servants. I should have treasured our time together more.

Pushing my own regrets to the wayside, I knew the only way I’d get any peace of mind was to apologize.

“There’s no excuse for what I did, breaking that priceless vase, Mr. Fisalis! I was very sleepy and wasn’t paying attention to what I was doing and I really ought to have done more to keep it from falling and I am truly, very sorry!” An earnest apology seemed like my best bet at that moment, and apologize I did: in one breath, after which I promptly stared at my shoes, groveling.

I’ll take whatever rebuke he wants to throw at me. I shall atone for my sins!

But, contrary to my expectations, the next words out of Mr. Fisalis’ mouth were ones of kind reassurance. And a sigh. Lest we forget the sigh.

“I don’t care about the vase! Rohtas said you were unhurt, but I’m just relieved now that I’ve seen for myself that he was right!”

I raised my head nervously to see him looking back at me with a confused smile.

“But wasn’t it really valuable?” *I mean, I saw how extra careful the servants*

were with it.

“I can replace those as many times as I need to. It was only a vase, a simple decoration.” Like the servants had done earlier, Mr. Fisalis emphasized ‘only a vase’ and ‘decoration,’ too. As worried as I was, I was somewhat relieved to hear him say that. *No money, no problems! That’s how that saying goes, right?*

“Really?”

“If you’d like, why don’t we go look for something to replace that vase together?” His face seemed to glow as he made the suggestion.

“I’m no good at that—interior decorating, I mean—so I’d be no help to you,” I humbly declined.

Mr. Fisalis just smiled wryly.

“Not according to Mimosa. See, everything turned out fine, Viola.” It was here, at a break in the back and forth between me and Mr. Fisalis, that Mother, who had been watching in silence, decided to interject. *Is it just me, or has her gaze softened?*

“...Okay. But I still feel guilty.”

“Just be more careful from now on, dear. We can’t afford to replace multiple vases for the Fisalis family.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Mother looked at me with a satisfied expression (I guess I appeared sufficiently regretful) before turning to address Mr. Fisalis directly.

“Duke Fisalis, welcome to my humble home. I’m sorry you had to come all the way out here like this. You caught us right in the middle of dinner, but if you’ll wait just one moment, I can bring you a cup of tea.”

“Oh, no, I should apologize, I’m the one barging in while you’re eating. I’d love some tea, but please don’t go out of your way.”

“Excuse me just a moment, then. Oh, Duke Fisalis, have you had dinner yet?”

“No, ma’am. I came here as soon as I returned home from work.”

Whaaat!? He rushed over here that quickly!? He didn’t need to do that; he

must've been starving already by the time he got home.

“Goodness, you must be hungry. It’s not much, nor is it terribly fancy, but would you like to eat dinner with us?” Mother offered Mr. Fisalis without hesitation.

Mother! What do you think you’re doing, asking him to eat our struggle meal!? I was momentarily struck dumb by her brazenness, but when I came back to myself, I whispered in her ear, “Mo—Mother!? What’re you doing, trying to feed him our slop!?”

“Nonsense, Vi. Even the simplest meals are a banquet to an empty stomach.”

“Nononononono, his stomach isn’t like ours.” How could you say that with a straight face? You should see what he eats at the manor!

Mr. Fisalis, however, quickly accepted Mother’s invitation, completely oblivious to my worries. “Thank you kindly. I think I will.”

“Ah, good, good. I’ll have Orchis put a chair for you right next to Viola. Please, take a seat. I’ll be right back,” Mother said, clearly oblivious to my feelings, too.

Orchis brought over a chair. Mr. Fisalis sat down and was quickly handed a plate, but the sight of this flawlessly handsome nobleman eating my mother’s rustic bread and soup was uncomfortably surreal. He, too, seemed a little bit uncomfortable, looking as if this was his first time eating such simple fare and he was unsure how to process what he was seeing on the table.

“Is something wrong?” Mother asked him, when he still hadn’t moved to start to eat.

“Oh, no. I was just appreciating how... artisanal this food is,” he replied, looking up at her with a smile.

Excellent choice of phrasing, there, Mr. Fisalis!

“Well, your body needs simple and healthy food. Eating large quantities of sumptuous food at every meal, every day, will only ruin your health,” Mother said confidently, shattering everything nobles were known to believe about food. I couldn’t help but be a little nervous listening to her.

“It will?” Mr. Fisalis asked in return, one-hundred-percent serious.

“Look at people these days—it’s no secret. A lot of people are carrying around too much fat on their bodies. And for a lot of those people, chronic disease and owning land go hand-in-hand.”

“...What you say is true, ma’am.”

But his parents weren’t fat when I saw them last! And they live in the countryside; isn’t that a healthy lifestyle?

Although what Mother said didn’t apply to his own parents, Mr. Fisalis nodded along, perhaps thinking of other nobles. I tried to remember the few social events I’d attended myself.

...There are definitely a lot of people who fit that bill!

Mother was pleased that Mr. Fisalis was listening so attentively, so she continued on with her sermon.

“You’re still young, though, Duke, and your drills as a knight provide adequate exercise, but in the future, when you’re not as active, a rich diet will do you no good.”

“I see. Thank you for the advice.” His admiration for my mother was apparent in his voice.

“Oh, my, we’ve just been talking this whole time. Please, go ahead and eat before it gets cold.”

“Oh, yes, I will. Thank you again for the food,” Mr. Fisalis said before picking up his spoon and elegantly taking a taste of the soup. His table manners were impeccable, due to his good upbringing.

Why is he treating our humble meal like a five star dinner!?

I watched him anxiously, unsure if his palate would approve of our food.

“This is delicious! The flavor is very mild,” he said, surprise coloring his face when he looked up from his bowl.

Well, yeah, that’s because it’s just soup with some veggies in it.

“So it’s to your liking, then? It’s a vegetable soup—gentle on your stomach and very nutritious,” Mother explained with a smile.

Enough with the lip service, Mother.

It was a vegetable stock made of scraps that couldn't be used for salad, so 'vegetable soup' technically wasn't a misnomer! It made for a totally different flavor—simpler and cleaner—than Cartham's fancy consommé, though.

"It's very good, truly, it is. I've never tasted anything like it, even from my own chef."

"The secret is to thoroughly cook all the ingredients. And of course, to use everything and waste nothing."

Mr. Fisalis fell silent. It appeared that 'waste nothing' rang a bell.

Honing in on his reaction, my mother continued, "You know, if you do waste food, a giant, green man will come and get you. That's what they say, anyway..."

Oh great, now she's breaking out her old pearls of wisdom. Once she starts, she'll never stop.

My whole family was well aware of her habits, so we focused on eating to shorten her window of opportunity to trap us at the table. And as soon as I was finished eating, I said, "Everything was great! We're going to go to the living room so you and Mr. Fisalis can chat. C'mon, Thistle, Freesia."

"Okaaay!" my siblings eagerly agreed.

"Wait! Viola!?" Mr. Fisalis looked at me, startled, as I made my escape.

He stared back at me with pleading puppy-dog eyes and his tail tucked between his legs (metaphorically, of course), but I had heard enough of Mother's stories for multiple lifetimes and could probably have recited them by heart at that point, so I smiled and patted his shoulder as I told him, "No, please, take your time!"

I'm sorry, but you are a sacrifice I am willing to make.

Mother's lecture continued on for a while thereafter.

—

Mr. Fisalis came into the living some time later, looking even more drained

and tired than before. (Wonder why!) I, meanwhile, had been relaxing with Thistle, Freesia, and a picture book. His long legs carried him quickly over to me.

“How about we head home soon, Viola? Everyone’s worried about you,” he asked, gently pulling me to my feet.

“Sounds good to me. Well, guys...” I shut the book, but just as I stood up:

“Nooo! Are you going home, Vivi!?” Thistle cried, clinging to my hand, the one Mr. Fisalis wasn’t using to pull me up. Who could resist those sad eyes he was giving me? And they were sapphire blue, just like mine, so I knew well the extent of their powers!

“Stay here longer with us, Viviii!” Freesia wrapped her arms around my waist.

Oh nooo, she knows the extent of her cuteness powers, too!

“We have to get going, soon. Everyone at the manor’s been worried about Viola all day, so we don’t want to keep them waiting any longer...” Mr. Fisalis told Thistle.

“But all you did today was lay around, Vivi!” Thistle argued back, his eyes growing wetter.

That I did, brother mine. That was wrong of me! But I was sooo tired! I couldn’t help it! The love of sleep is the root of all evil, as they say.

“I want you to read to me mooore!” Freesia’s little arms closed tighter around my midsection. *Not you too!*

“I’m sorry, Thistle, Freesia...”

Now, I wasn’t some monster that could just tell my little brother and sister no as they clung to me, so I cautiously asked Mr. Fisalis, “...Um, is there any chance I could come home *tomorrow?*”

He must have understood how much they had missed me, because he relented.

“...Fine... But please do actually come home tomorrow, then, okay?” he said, hanging his head in defeat.

“I will! Thank you!” I smiled brightly up at him in thanks for his consideration.

I tried for a million-dollar smile like his, but only managed about... twenty dollars. It must have been worth something, though, because his ears turned red.

“The things I do...” he mumbled under his breath with a sigh before declaring, “I’ll come get you on my way home from work tomorrow.”

“Ehh? You don’t need to come all the way here just to get me...” *I could make it home in time if I walk*, I thought to myself.

“How could you suggest such a thing!? I’m going to come pick you up, so *please*, just stay right here!” he very nearly shouted back.

Oh, I see, now. Your family name couldn’t bear the shame of your wife—a duchess, of all people—walking home, even as a joke.

I should have had more consideration for my aristocratic image.

“Sorry, I didn’t think about how that would look...”

“No... well, yes, but I shouldn’t have reacted like that. I want to pick you up myself because I care about you. Please don’t get the wrong idea, okay?”

“...Yes?”

Sooo, you’re saying “don’t bring dishonor upon my family?” I read you loud and clear!

18 — Let's Go Home

So, it was not a letter of divorce that I received from Mr. Fisalis, but a pardon; I was finally able to clear my mind and, moreover, completely refill my tank so to speak, thanks to some relaxation at my parents' house. Naturally, I was able to reduce the effects of my earlier sleep deprivation, too. My old, slightly hard (but don't call it cheap!) bed was very relaxing. I didn't sleep in it all those years for nothing. I ended up sleeping so deeply that I didn't even dream.

What calmed me down the most, though, was being able to spend time with my adorable little siblings and talk with Mother. Well, I didn't want to make her worry too much, so I kind of glossed over some things. Especially the parts about Calendula.

In short, I made a full recovery!

I had a happy dinner with my family (minus Father) and the family servants plus Mimosa, and then we enjoyed some after-dinner tea in the living room. Although... Mr. Fisalis hadn't come to get me yet, even though he had promised he would.

Given how eager he was to get me home yesterday, I thought for sure that he'd leave work early, but maybe something is keeping him.

"I'm so glad that everyone at the Fisalis manor is so kind to me. I don't know what I'd do if they bullied me for coming from a poorer family."

"Your etiquette is terrible, so I kept worrying you'd be off making dumb mistakes and just causing trouble for everyone. I'm relieved that's not the case," Mother smiled. *Oh, Mother, it's just like you to slide in random jabs at me! It stings quite a bit, but I'm just gonna ignore that.*

"It really is quite the manor, though, it's so big and grand—oh, I know! Next time you and Father can come over to visit!"

"Is this our formal invitation? We'd love to!"

"I wanna go too!" cried Thistle, raising his hand.

“Me too!” agreed Freesia.

“I’ll have to ask Mr. Fisalis first, of course. The gardens there are so expansive you could get lost in them! Mimosa’s husband is the head gardener, and he’s great at his job and handsome to boot! He does have kind of a scary face, though.”

“And that’s Mr. Bellis, right?”

“Huh!? You know Bellis, Mother?” I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

How do you know the Demon King of the Orangery, Mother!?

“Know him? He came to take care of our garden! *That* Bellis!” said my mother, looking at Mimosa as if to say, ‘isn’t that right?’

This was the first time I’d had heard about any of this, though, so I looked at Mimosa too and asked, “Is that true?”

“It certainly is,” she smiled back, proudly gushing about her husband. I could understand where she was coming from, though. The way my parents’ garden had been so utterly transformed could be the work of no one else but Bellis!

“That explains how the garden looks so wonderful and sophisticated now! Just what I’d expect from him. Making a proper garden out of a patch of wildflowers and grass. What sort of strange powers must he...”

“He doesn’t use magic, Madam,” said Mimosa, staring at me like I was delusional. *Guess that’s her way of saying, ‘keep your weird ideas away from my hubby.’*

“Of course not,” I said, breaking eye contact with her, and shattering the image in my mind of a brooding gentleman in a jet black cloak that rippled around his legs in the wind as he gazed over a little garden overrun with weeds... *Yeah, stopping there. Silly me, of course Bellis doesn’t have magical gardening powers! Gardening is a skill; it just takes someone with a green thumb and man power!*

“...Ahem. Still, I can’t thank Mr. Fisalis enough for fixing up the family house, even though I had no idea he was doing so!”

He might be a duke, but to my family he was more like a savior, repaying their

loan and fixing their house. Of course, I had known about the loan since it was in our contract, but having found out that he had gone so far as to repair the house, my opinion of him shot up like stock prices in a bull market.

“You’re right about that, Viola, so make sure you tell him thank you for us!”

“I will!” *It’s not like I didn’t do everything else for you growing up—the cleaning, the laundry, the housework, looking after the kids.*

Although I had resolved myself internally, Mother felt the need to give me one more little stab through the heart—I mean, a reminder.

“Please don’t break anything else, dear. Don’t make mistakes that we’d have to pay for.” She was smiling, but not in a happy way.

“...I won’t.” *O Mother, prithee, cease thy deadly barbs,* I couldn’t help but think.

Just then, Orchis cut short our conversation with such perfect timing I would have thought he planned it.

“Miss Viola, Duke Fisalis has arrived.”

I shot up from my chair. Orchis then led me to the living room where Mr. Fisalis was waiting. Judging from how he was dressed in tidy civilian clothes rather than his uniform, just like yesterday, I wagered that it had been Rohtas who had held him back. *And considering what time it is, he’s probably already finished dinner, too.*

Acting just as impulsive as earlier, when I blurted out how indebted I was to him in front of my whole family, I bolted over.

“I’m so sorry to make you come all the way out here again like this, Mr. Fisalis!” *Argh, he looks like he’s surrounded by a halo of light today—even more than usual! It’s completely burning through my own twenty-dollar smile*

First he looked surprised to see me act that way, but then his shock turned to wonder, soon followed by a soft smile.

“Did you have a relaxing time, Viola?” he asked, taking my hand that I spontaneously held out to him.

“I did, thank you! I’m feeling much better, all thanks to you!”

“I’m glad to hear it. Maybe you should visit your family now and again. Anyway, shall we get going?”

He pulled me toward him until the distance between us was next to nothing. When I looked up at him (he’s sooo much taller than me!), he gazed deeply into my eyes with an even softer smile, making my heart skip a beat.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, what am I doing? I might have run over to him, yes, but since when do I get all worked up over just a little bit of intimacy? We had been physically close before—I’d had him practically glued to my hip—so why was I reacting like this? I realized I was blushing.

Unable to understand this inner turmoil, I pulled my hand back and casually made some space between myself and Mr. Fisalis, while suggesting, “Why don’t you have some tea?” and motioning towards the sofa.

“No, I’m fine. I’m already late in coming to get you, since I was slow to leave. I’ll have some next time,” he declined good-naturedly.

I was pretty sure his being held up at work and coming home late was connected to the servants experiencing an increase in work, so I meekly said, “Sure,” and nodded.

I’d come empty-handed for the most part, so once Mimosa had gathered my personal effects, I’d be ready to leave. She had everything ready, my belongings in her arms, and was waiting behind me in mere moments.

“I’m sorry to leave you in such a hurry like this, Madam Euphorbia. Please do come visit us next time.”

“I look forward to doing so.”

Mr. Fisalis and Mother exchanged goodbyes as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders to escort me out. His elegant farewell to her, complete with his typical gleaming smile, was an enchanting sight to behold. I couldn’t help but stare in fascination.

“Thank you for thinking of repairing my parents’ house. I had no idea you’d done that, so apologies for the late thank-you,” I told Mr. Fisalis as soon as the carriage pulled away, my family and their servants waving goodbye as we left.

“The loan was part of the contract from the start, but I didn’t know you’d repair the house, too.”

When I looked at his handsome face across from me in the carriage, he seemed a little surprised.

“Mr. Fisalis?”

“Oh, er, sorry.”

“What’s the matter?”

You’re just too proud to say that you paid to fix my parents’ house out-of-pocket, is that it? If that’s the reason, then I take back my earlier thank-you’s.

“Well, no, I hadn’t planned to... How do I put it? It was an easy decision to make when I realized it would make you happy,” he replied with a strange smile.

Okay then.

Is it just me, or does he smile like a blooming flower at even the slightest bit of praise these days? I had always thought those sorts of expressions were kind of embarrassing on men, but when this guy smiles, I can practically see the flower petals drifting around him. That doesn’t happen when I smile... is where my mind wandered to.

His response was suspiciously vague. Then again, what it cost to fix the house was probably pennies to him. But me being me, since it had made my family very happy, I decided to pass on their gratitude.

“My whole family is very pleased. I can’t thank you enough!”

“Oh?” He gave another faint smile before quickly redirecting his gaze out the window in silence.

He was in such a good mood a few minutes ago; what happened? I just don’t understand men. Maybe he had a rough day at work, so he’s worn out now. I’ll be quiet too, then.

Mr. Fisalis usually had a lot to talk about, but now that he didn’t, it was dead silent. The only sound was of the wheels rolling heavily over the ground.

I guess I'll just look out my window, as well.

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 2: The Cause of the Delay — from Cercis' Perspective ◆ ◆ ◆

The day after Viola returned to her parents' house for the first time since we got married:

"How's Viola!?" I asked in a panic as I burst through the front door. Only Rohtas, as per usual, was there to greet me. *How can he be making that calm face at a time like this?*

"Madam is still at her parents' home," he replied simply.

Her parents' home? I know she went back to her parents' house yesterday; did the changes to the house cause her more mental strain? Oh, wait.

Rohtas said, "still." There's something off, though, about his response to what I said.

"But you said she was in the hospital."

"I said no such thing. Take a closer look, it says 'she's at the Euphorbia residence,'" Rohtas said, pointing to the paper clenched in my hand. It was thoroughly crumpled, me having all but sprinted home with it in hand.

It read, 'MADAM AT ER [STOP] COME HOME PROMPTLY [STOP]'

Apparently, I had panicked when I'd received the message and misread it.

Damn. I suppose I overreacted. This is humiliating, though, so I'm going to pretend nothing happened.

"Ahem—so, then, Viola has come home, has she?"

"No, Master. As I said a moment ago, she is still at her parents' residence."

"What?" You're *the one who wrote this message! It says 'MADAM AT ER COME HOME PROMPTLY.'* I'm not misreading it now.

I read over the message once more before looking back at Rohtas in confusion.

“It clearly indicates that you should stop at the Euphorbia house on your way home to collect her,” Rohtas said with an air of innocence.

“What should I do now?”

“Well, you ought not intrude on them while they are eating, and dinner is almost ready here, as well.”

“Can’t I just eat there?”

“I’m not certain that their financial situation allows for another—”

“What if I paid them for the food...?”

“What did I tell you about memories and physical objects, Master?”

I stared at Rohtas half in surprise, half embarrassment.

“...That memories are priceless.”

Rohtas stared back at me with one elegantly arched eyebrow.

“Well then, the first course should be ready about now. Go and change for dinner, please.”

“...I’ll be down shortly.”

19 — A Perfect Replacement

I was quiet for some time, letting the carriage rock me back and forth, not really noticing how sleepy it was making me. The trip wasn't even that long, but my eyes started to shut on their own. No sooner had I dozed off than—*klonk!*—I banged my head hard against the wall.

"Mmmrgh," I groaned in pain, opening my eyes.

"What did you... *pffft!*... do?" Mr. Fisalis had been looking out his own window in silence until it happened, at which point his eyes looked like they'd pop out of their sockets as he tried to hold back immature laughter.

"Ngh, I just got a little sleepy. Sorry." *How embarrassing! I'm sitting right in front of him. At least it got rid of the awkward silence. I'm less tense now.*

"No need to apologize. More importantly, is your head alright? No lump or anything?" Mr. Fisalis inquired, although his eyes were still dancing with laughter. I didn't see what was so funny that he needed to laugh like an idiot, so I just closed my eyes again.

"I'm fine."

"Good. We'll be there soon. Everyone's eager to see you home, so please don't give them the impression you have a concussion."

"Okay."

It seemed like my knock on the head also knocked down the invisible wall between us. Just as the peaceful feeling that we'd started our journey with was starting to return, we arrived back at the Fisalis manor.

We got out, Mr. Fisalis offering his arm to escort me in, and no sooner had we opened the door when:

"Welcome home, Madam!"

Is this all the servants out here!? I can nearly hear them all bow like, *fwoosh, fwoosh, fwoosh*, perfect forty-five degree angles.

I feel like I've seen this before. It must've been how they first greeted me when I came here after the wedding ceremony. But I don't really need a grandiose greeting like this now...

Upon closer inspection, Rohtas and Dahlia were there, naturally, but also all of the maids, Cartham and his cooks, all the lower servants, and even the gardening team! Including Bellis! It really looked like everyone!

"See, what did I tell you? Everyone was waiting for you to come home," Mr. Fisalis whispered in my ear just as everyone greeted me with smiles on their faces.

"I-I'm home," I was feeling the pressure after such a fabulous welcome. Though the servants were supposed to have time off after the day's work was done and I felt it was unfair to expect them to greet us like this, it did make me very happy.

Already well-rested, I headed straight to my room, hopped into the bath, and then into bed. Getting into bed might've been more like a cannonball, though. It would be foolish to try to compare my cloud-like bed at the manor, with its freshly-washed sheets, to my bed at my old house—they were almost like two different kinds of furniture—but this bed was still my favorite.

"It should be illegal for a bed to be this soft!" I commented as I snuggled into my pillow, delighting in the feel.

"I am glad to hear it," Dahlia replied. She and Mimosa smiled at me, even though I wasn't exactly being an example of good manners.

"Sorry for putting myself in a bad mood the other day. Mr. Fisalis told me it wasn't a big deal while I was recharging at my parents' house, so I should be back to normal tomorrow!"

"I'm happy you're feeling better, Madam," said Mimosa. "You looked so down that we were all sad, too! Anyway, sleep well."

"You too. Good night."

Dahlia and Mimosa bowed and quietly left my room.

I'll be back to one hundred percent tomorrow, and back to wandering around

the manor! And I'll stay farther away from expensive decorations than I did before. I'll have to be extra careful about that. If I break something expensive again, they might kick me out for real.

Gosh, though... These sheets feel so nice. The faint, fresh smell of detergent; their silky smooth slide over my skin. I really do feel like I've come home. Breathing in the scent is so relaxing, it's making me sl— zzz.

"Viola... Viola..." A man's voice pierced through the haze of sleep.

...That sounds like Mr. Fisalis. Am I still dreaming?

"Viola, wake up," I heard the voice say, this time accompanied by a gentle shake of my shoulder. *This feels incredibly real for a dream.*

How odd. I thought I went to bed by myself. And Mr. Fisalis should be sleeping in his own room; there's no reason for me to be hearing his voice.

My head was still foggy with sleep, but I managed to open my eyes just a sliver.

I let out a silent scream.

What I had opened my eyes to was Mr. Fisalis' gorgeous smile much, much too close to my face.

Whoa, whoa, whaaat!?

My eyes were now wide open, pupils fully dilated in surprise; I scuttled away from him at what felt like the speed of light until my back hit the wall.

Ho—Holy cow. I think my heart stopped. No, that's impossible... okay, maybe for a split second. But only because I stopped breathing. I know this has to be real life because my back hurts, but what in the name of all that is holy is going on!?

"M—M—Mr. Fisalis!?" I stuttered uncontrollably.

The moment I was certain that the incomprehensible sight of him before me was not a dream, my heart began to race, not stop. *I can literally feel myself turning bright red.*

“Oh, good, you’re finally up. Good morning,” he said with a refreshing smile from where he was sitting crossed-legged right next to me on the bed.

That’s right, out of all the places he could’ve sat on this huuuge bed, he chose right next to where I’d fallen asleep in the middle (I have good sleeping posture, okay?), trapping me between himself and the wall. Which also meant that he had opened the canopy around my bed.

“Go—Good morning...? Um, did I really oversleep that much?” I nervously asked, looking up at him. He had already changed out of his night clothes.

This is the first this has ever happened. It never mattered whether I overslept (which wasn’t often) or woke up too early; Mr. Fisalis never woke me up in person.

“No, the opposite, in fact. It’s much earlier than when you normally wake up,” replied with yet another grin.

Okaaay. My point wasn’t the time so much as why you’re in my bed.

“Oh, it’s earlier? Where are Dahlia and Mimosa?” I asked, looking for my two usual morning helpers. I spotted them standing against the wall, eyes downcast. It was obvious they were trying not to look my way, putting the skills they’d developed to ignore my wacky behavior to use.

It wouldn’t make a difference if they were looking anyway; this would still be extremely embarrassing.

In other words, I wished they would get Mr. Fisalis out of there. Very much so. I made sure to give the two of them a resentful glare.

“I’m here because I wanted your opinion on something. That’s why I woke up so early and came in,” he explained with a refreshing smile perfectly suited to the morning hours.

I see.

I had zero idea what he could possibly mean by ‘my opinion.’ Cue head tilt.

“Talk?”

“Yeah. I want to show it to you before breakfast, so get ready,” he said as he took my hand and pulled me up.

“Okay?” He wants my opinion and to show me something? What’s going on here? I let him tug me out of bed, still puzzled.

“Oh! You need to get dressed! If there’s anything I could do to help—”

What, like just sit there and watch? I can’t believe him! Spouting nonsense first thing in the morning! Un-be-liev-able.

“Dahliaaaa, Mimosaaaa. Hi, good morning. I’m awake. Could I, um, have you wait in the salon, Mr. Fisalis? It won’t take me very long to get ready.”

“...Sure.”

My brain had switched on as soon as Mr. Fisalis’ crazy talk started, and I was now fully operational.

What a lovely, invigorating morning! My sore back? What sore back? Pain is but an illusion!

Once Mr. Fisalis had been chased... er, I mean, asked to leave my room, I went and sat at the vanity where Mimosa was waiting.

“A shock like that, so early in the morning, can’t be good for your heart. A sparkling, handsome man being the first thing you lay eyes on? One minute I thought my heart had stopped, and then the next it was racing. That’s a no from me,” I complained as Mimosa combed my hair.

Now that Mr. Fisalis was gone, my heart had finally returned to its normal rate. It hurt beating that fast! I thought I was going to die.

“We were surprised, too, since it wasn’t time to wake you yet. We ran into Master standing in front of your door just as we were passing by. So we all came in together, and the two of us were told to wait. I never imagined he’d come to wake you himself,” Dahlia said from behind Mimosa, where she was getting my dress ready. I could see their strained smiles in the mirror.

“Only a coward attacks someone while they’re sleeping...”

“Now, now, Madam,” Dahlia said soothingly.

“Even so, what did he mean when he said he wanted my opinion? And then he said he wanted to show me something?”

“I’m wondering that myself. I haven’t a clue.” Dahlia shook her head.

“What about you, Mimosa?”

“I don’t know either.” I saw Mimosa shake her head in the mirror, as well.

Even though I didn’t know what Mr. Fisalis wanted to talk about, or what he wanted to show off, I finished my usual, simple morning routine, and hurried down to the salon.

“Here it is.”

What Mr. Fisalis had wanted to show me turned out to be a huge houseplant, which he was holding in his arms.

We were in the greenhouse. After I got dressed and met him in the salon, he brought me out there.

“This?” The plant was dense and round, with clusters of small pink flowers nestled between lush green leaves. It wasn’t particularly eye-catching—just a pretty little potted plant. It seemed like it was in full bloom, because the flowers emitted a pleasant, sweet scent.

I knew that I had cared for these flowers before, but had a hunch that they were in a plain pot back then. Now, they had been transplanted to a more stylish one.

“Yep. I was thinking of putting it in the entryway as a decoration, but I’d like your opinion first.”

“In the entryway?”

“Yeah, I thought this would give you more peace of mind than a pricey vase, or something.”

Ohhh... he means where that vase I broke used to be.

I felt a small twinge of guilt when I realized what he meant, but I much preferred this over him showing off his status and money by dragging me around town, buying pointless luxuries.

“Yes, that sounds like a great idea!” I wholeheartedly agreed, clasping my

hands together and practically buzzing with energy.

“Oh, good, I was right. I hoped you’d say that. I had a fancier pot brought out from the storehouse for it. Do you like it? Shall we take it inside?” he smiled bashfully, suddenly realizing that he might not have been totally clear.

You actually reused something! That’s great! No one would guess this pot wasn’t brand new, what with its on-trend white paint and dainty bas relief flower design. This will give the entrance a more informal vibe.

“Thank you so much! I think it looks lovely!” I told him, and I meant it, smiling ear to ear.

...And I’ll be sure not to destroy this one!

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 3: A Performance Review? — from Cercis' Perspective ◆ ◆ ◆

I was struck with the idea to replace the broken vase that had once stood in the entryway with a plant from the greenhouse, transplanted into a fancy pot, so I got one ready while Viola was at her parents' house. Bellis had remembered an old pot that wasn't being used and suggested that one, which turned out to be a success. I asked for Viola's opinion when we were done, just in case, and she was even happier than I'd anticipated.

I headed back to my room to get ready for work with Viola's smile, itself like a blossoming flower, in the back of my mind, but when I opened the door Rohtas was there waiting for me, with a dark smile on his face.

...What's with his creepy aura? And here I was in a great mood after I managed to make Viola happy. Am I not allowed to smile? Is that it? Are you going to be pissy and ask, "Are you certain that smiling like a fop is truly becoming of a man in your position?" or something? I can't help it if I smile. Viola's just that cute.

"What are you doing here, Rohtas?" I asked, shooting him a quizzical look.

"Did Madam like her present?" he replied.

"Yes, of course. Good thing you told me she likes pretty flowers."

"I see. So our information was useful to you, then?"

"Yeah. So what are you doing in my room?" I asked again, trying to get to the heart of the matter. *You couldn't have been waiting here for me just to ask me that.*

Rohtas' smile remained in place as he started to speak again.

"This is merely something I heard from Dahlia and Mimosa, but..."

I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

“They said you let yourself into Madam’s room this morning.”

Grrr. So you heard.

“I can understand wanting to show off your present, but do you perhaps think it might’ve been a better idea to, shall we say, wait it out until you came home from work?” he asked coolly.

“But I wanted to show it to her earlier!” I sulked.

“Be that as it may, did you see no issue in barging into a lady’s room like that?”

“Bu—But she’s my wife!”

“On paper, she is.”

“Oof.” Rohtas’ words were like a bullet to the chest.

I want to cry.

“And I’m trying my hardest to change that!” I fired back, not letting him see how what he said hurt me.

“May I humbly suggest a more... wholesome approach, Master,” he replied, casually dodging and firing back one of his own.

Mayday, mayday, mayday.

“...I just wanted to see what she looked like asleep,” I sulked, now in a bad mood.

Rohtas said nothing, just stared back at me dumbfounded.

“We slept in the same room when my parents were here, but I wasn’t really interested in her back then, and didn’t see what she looked like. Looking back on it, I couldn’t help but feel like I missed a perfect opportunity.”

“...Master?”

“...Yes?”

“Common sense is an invaluable trait.”

“Yes, I’ll keep that in mind from now on.”

20 — They're Coming Back

My little property damage incident had cut me to the bone, but neither the servants nor Mr. Fisalis were mad at me, so I counted my blessings! And as long as they didn't give me the boot, I'd continue to do my best at the manor, my determination fully renewed, starting that day.

I gave my undivided attention to window cleaning that day, duel-wielding a rag in each hand. I was working on the floor-to-ceiling glass wall, the one that let you see everything going on outside and let in so much sunshine. It was pretty routine for me, but as it was one big pricey sheet of glass, I decided to play it safe and only clean as far as my hand could reach from the ground.

So there I was, cleaning that massive window in the salon, polishing it until it shone like a diamond and my fingers hurt, when Rohtas appeared.

"Madam, a letter has arrived from Lord and Lady Fisalis."

"Oh, my in-laws?"

I forgot to write them after they visited, so maybe they're upset? I can just pretend I didn't realize it when I write them back. I can say, 'Ah ha ha ha, I received your letter just after I sent out my own! What are the chances?' I schemed, but let's just pretend you didn't know that.

"Yes, Madam. I am told that they have been summoned to the Royal Palace and will thus be in the capital. They'll be staying at the manor during their time here," Rohtas explained. Rohtas always read the mail that was delivered to the manor unless it was confidential. I stopped wiping the window to take the letter from him and examine its contents. I scanned over the letter, finding that it read exactly as he'd summarized.

Plus one more major detail.

"They're coming the day after tomorrow?" I stared at Rohtas.

"So it appears," he replied calmly.

But that's just two days away. What's more, it's already late afternoon today; it'll be evening soon. Mr. Fisalis is probably almost home, so I won't be able to start preparing for their arrival. So basically I have only a single day to get ready. Yet another thing I would've liked to have known about sooner!

"Does Mr. Fisalis know about this?"

"No, the letter was only just delivered, so I suspect he's unaware. Unless another letter was sent to his place of work."

"Okay. Well, I can't start to prepare for them today since it's almost evening, but... we should have enough time, so long as we have a whole day." Every nook and cranny of the house was always polished, dusted, and swept, anyway. There was no reason to panic over some surprise guests!

"Of course, Madam."

"So that just means preparing a guest room and discussing meal plans. Oh, that's right. I'll have to share my room with Mr. Fisalis again, won't I?"

"Most likely, yes."

"In that case, I'll need a cot for my room! Could you have one brought up for me?"

"...Very well." What came out of his mouth meant 'yes,' but his expression clearly said otherwise. "It looks as if you will be busy tomorrow."

I let myself sink into the sofa, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. I started to go over my plans for the next day in my head. *We'll have to be even more scrupulous with the cleaning, and I'll need to swap out all the flower arrangements. I'll need a lot of fresh flowers. Guess I had better ask Bellis to arrange some for me.*

I told Mr. Fisalis about the letter when he got home that evening, but one had been sent to his work as well, so he already knew about his parents' plans to visit.

"I'm sorry that they're just dropping in so suddenly on you," he apologized, looking crestfallen.

"It's sudden, that's for sure, but we should be able to make it work with a day

to prepare. It is out of the blue, though. They let us know a week ahead, last time,” I commented, a little confused. I hadn’t said so without thinking about it first—I’d never do that—but Mr. Fisalis seemed to take it as a complaint.

“They had no choice. They received an urgent directive from the Royal Palace... about our territory, apparently. They explained it to me in the letter I got,” he said, raising a gently closed fist to his mouth in contemplation.

What he said didn’t seem like something I ought to pry into, so I ignored his mention of the reason for their summons.

No need to look so worried, Mr. Fisalis!

I changed the subject, to try to cheer him up.

“Oh, I see. Well, I’ll do my best to make sure everything is prepared to their liking. Oh, that reminds me, I’ll be sharing a room with you again, won’t I?” This was rather important, so I wanted to confirm it with him, just in case.

“That’s right,” he said, his frown turning upside down very quickly.

Well that was fast. Wonder what made him change his tune like that? Oh, well. Not important. Now that he’s confirmed we’ll be rooming together, that means I get to take the cot!

“Alright, we’ll do the same as last time. I’ll bring a cot up for *me* to use,” I told him, thinking it was obvious.

“Huhhh!?” Based on the way Mr. Fisalis’ voice cracked in response, however, it seemed I was mistaken. His disappointment was written all over his face: eyes wide and brows scrunched.

The way his face changed so quickly, he’s like a mime! Was he always this expressive? And what’s he unhappy about anyway? I’m the one who’s going to be in the cot, not him.

“I would’ve been fine sleeping on the sofa, but Rohtas strictly forbade me,” I explained reproachfully. *I honestly don’t mind sleeping on either the cot or the sofa.*

“I’d forbid it, too!” Mr. Fisalis replied, flatly.

So he doesn’t want me sleeping on the sofa, either. Okay.

“I’m bringing up a cot, though,” I reminded him.

“...Because of course there’s no other option here? Yeah, okay.”

He muttered something, but I couldn’t hear what.

Sheesh, you’re so stubborn, Mr. Fisalis.

The next day, after seeing Mr. Fisalis off to work, the servants and I gathered in the staff dining room for an emergency meeting. On the agenda, to no one’s surprise, was, ‘Preparing for Lord and Lady Fisalis’ Visit Tomorrow.’ All of the lower servants were sitting at the tables, under the watchful eye/instruction of Chairman Rohtas. It looked like the meeting had started without me (Why would they wait? It wasn’t like I was their boss, ha ha), but they were letting me join in the fun because I had threatened to cry if they didn’t!

“We had plenty of time to prepare the last time they visited, but we won’t have that luxury now. This time, we have been granted only one day. Everyone, brace yourselves to begin work immediately,” Rohtas declared briskly as he started the meeting.

“Yes sir!” everyone replied stiffly.

Rohtas bowed deeply in response.

“First on the agenda is cleaning. We are normally very fastidious with our cleaning, so we should not run into any problems there, but take care where care is due,” Rohtas addressed the group of servants who would be cleaning, to which they gave a ‘yes sir’ before leaving for their stations.

Rohtas then moved on to his next assignment.

“Those assigned to cleaning will also change all of the linens.”

“Yes sir!”

“Kitchen staff, order more ingredients than usual. We need to be able to fulfill any and all requests.”

“*Bien sôr,*” Cartham replied, bowing vigorously.

“There are no special requests for the gardening staff. Please go about your

work as per usual.”

“Understood,” Bellis answered blandly, bowing.

There was a pause in the exchange between Rohtas and the servants, so I decided to speak up.

“Er, excuse me?” I raised my hand nervously, calling Rohtas’ attention.

“Yes, Madam?” he replied, permitting me to speak.

“I’d like to change out the flower arrangements in the house, so I need a large quantity of flowers. And I was hoping I could help Bellis arrange them, too.” I said.

“That’s fine with me,” replied Bellis.

“Alright then. Gardening team and Bellis, Madam will be assisting you with decorating,” Rohtas informed the gardeners of their updated assignment.

“Understood,” Bellis said with a bow.

“Could you, Madam, and the as-yet-unassigned maids also handle the other decorations, as well?” Rohtas inquired, looking my way.

“Why of course! I’d be more than happy to!” I answered him excitedly.

The meeting adjourned shortly thereafter and everyone left for their stations. More than ever, the manor was alive with a flurry of activity. Time usually passed slowly, but for that single day it was no longer the case. We had to be extra thorough in our cleaning and interior decorating choices.

Lady Fisalis wasn’t the kind of mother-in-law who would run a finger along the windowsill and exclaim, “Goodness, dust here, too?” but we still furiously scrubbed and polished every surface!

All of the flowers were switched out, as were the linens. There was a steady flow of tradesmen coming to and fro as well. Rohtas had some urgent paperwork or something that needed seeing to, and so had shut himself in his office.

I’m sure it has something to do with Mr. Fisalis’ parents’ visit. I don’t really know for sure, though, so I’ll just let him be.

The day went by in a flash as we ran around getting ready for my in-laws' arrival. Before I knew it, it was already getting dark outside.

"Holy cow! It's already evening! I've been so busy, I forgot to get changed."

Not good, not good! I'm still in my maid's uniform.

I rushed back to my room with Mimosa in tow.

"That was a close one," she nodded. We'd both have some serious explaining to do if we both forgot and Mr. Fisalis came home to see me in a maid's uniform!

"I think you ought to take a quick bath. You were working quite hard today," Mimosa said as she headed to the bathroom to draw me a bath. I agreed to myself that I really had been working my butt off all day, so I did as she suggested.

It felt so refreshing to wash off the day's sweat. I had just finished getting dressed again when there was a knock on my door. It was Mr. Fisalis' maid.

"Master has returned, Madam and, er..."

Phew, just in time! But I was uneasy about the way the maid's sentence trailed off.

"And...?" *What could it be?* "Mr. Fisalis is home now, right? Is there something else?" I inquired of the maid, once she came in.

"There...There are guests with him from the chivalric order..." she answered, seemingly embarrassed.

Who the heck is coming now, when we're so busy!? ...Ahem. Mustn't let my feelings get the best of me.

In my surprise at the maid's reply, I flew out of my room in a panic, only to be greeted in the entryway by:

"Ahh! Madam! I haven't seen you in so long!"

"You look lovely today, as well!"

"We're here!" called Mr. Fisalis' stunningly gorgeous lady knights.

"Yo, it's Madam!"

“It’s like I’m dreaming again!”

“Still lookin’ hella cute!”

“What an angel!”

Mr. Fisalis’ male coworkers were inexplicably worked up.

“I’m home,” Mr. Fisalis finally said, with an expression that somehow came off as both embarrassed and refreshing as he surveyed the invasion into my freshly cleaned home.

21 — The Scheme

There was a noisy gaggle of knights in the entryway. Among them was my doofus of a husband, who had failed to tell me he was bringing his work home with him—literally! And once more, I only avoided being hugged to death by said knights when he pulled me to his side. *Not again.*

“Aren’t your parents coming tomorrow?” I stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear.

“Everyone said they wanted to throw a wrap party, so I gave them permission, but then they decided that it was going to be at *my* house...” Mr. Fisalis mumbled. He was looking everywhere but at me, too.

And what’s this ‘wrap party’? What’s he need a wrap party for? The servants and I should be the ones throwing a wrap party after the day we’ve had! What I got instead was an entryway overflowing with rowdy knights... Well, too late to run away now. I gotta get my head in the game!

“Well, not much we can do now that they’re here,” I told him.

“I thought you might say that!” he said, barely letting me finish my sentence and with a huge smile across his face. That cheered him up very quickly; I’d expected as much.

“In the meantime... could everyone please take a seat in the salon?” I said a bit louder to all the knights, all but squinting my eyes against the gleam of Mr. Fisalis’ megawatt smile. I could almost see a doggy tail wagging from behind his back.

I have a lot of questions, for sure, but saying something won’t make any difference now.

I mentally shrugged and questioned my life choices as I instructed Mr. Fisalis’ maid to take our guests to the salon. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Dahlia disappearing into the servants’ dining room. True to character, she seemed to go into ‘guest shift’ mode without having to be told to.

I hereby declare us to be entering Guest Shift!

I called a group huddle with my main team to review our plan of action.

We've stocked up on food and drink for tomorrow, so our reserves are fuller than usual. I didn't expect we'd be using them for this, but we have no choice, so we'll have to break those out.

"We've got plenty of food and drinks, right?"

"Correct," Rohtas gave a firm nod.

"If we run out, we can always buy more tomorrow, so let's serve the guests we have for now."

"Understood," Rohtas confirmed before turning to head to the kitchen to inform Cartham.

"Alright, then let's you and I head to the salon! Backup should be arriving there shortly."

"Roger!" Mimosa responded from where she was waiting at attention behind me. I mentally checked the buckles on my imaginary armor and marched out to the salon!

Thanks to the servants' hard work and prompt response, we had enough food, drink, and hands on deck ready to attend to our surprise guests without keeping them cordoned off in the salon. Like last time, food was served buffet style with small tables to stand at and eat.

Buffets are more fun when you have a lot of people, and besides, seated dining is too formal for something like this. This way is more casual and effortless.

"Oh, I've missed you!"

"The dress you're wearing is so cute! It looks great on you."

"You look even more beautiful than you did last time, Madam!"

The ladies seemed to be enjoying themselves, or least they enjoyed showering me with compliments. Before I knew it, the Bombshell Trio had surrounded me yet again.

Jeez, it's like they teleported or something. I feel bad for monopolizing their attention all the time, but on the other hand, I'm super uninteresting otherwise. Whenever I try to talk to men, I just bore them, so it's probably better this way.

"We're really sorry for barging in like this," one of the still-sober lady knights apologized. "This is for you," she then added, handing me a box of cakes from a confectioner that had been the talk of the town.

Oh, wow! These are from that shop that the servants are always talking about! I've wanted to go there!

"Thank you so much. You shouldn't have! You're always welcome here!" I tittered and smiled, taking the box from her with all the reverence of a priest holding a holy relic. *No, I don't have a sugar addiction. What are you talking about?*

"But the former duke and duchess are coming tomorrow, aren't they?" the knight with the shiny golden hair asked, her face suddenly very, very close to mine. *Oh gosh, she's so pretty!* I could feel my heart racing at this up-close-and-personal view of someone so drop-dead gorgeous.

"Uh, um, yes, they are, but we're all done getting ready," I smiled back.

"Way to go! We'll make sure we're out of here early tonight," she promised, her smile growing wider.

Once the alcohol was flowing, though, the ladies completely changed. Now thoroughly intoxicated, the girls-only slumber party atmosphere was back in full force. All three of them—the blonde, the silver-haired one, and the bronze-haired one—could drink like fish, just like they did last time; and, just like that, their promise that they'd be out of here early vanished into thin air. The other knights were having a good time drinking, too.

At this rate, we'll definitely have to restock drinks for tomorrow. Poor Rohtas is probably about ready to pop an artery.

"This is for our party pooper of a commander, who said he was gonna go straight home today when we decided to throw a party to celebrate surviving a day of back-to-back meetings!" the blonde knight said before she started to chug a full bottle of wine. Clearly no lightweight, she frantically grabbed a

second bottle once she'd finished the first one.

Ma'am, that's alcohol, not water! Please slow down!

"We even invited him along, didn't we!? Because usually he'd go with us, even just for a little bit, but he kept saying that he *had* to go home today."

Just then, I noticed that the silver-haired lady knight's glass was empty, too, so I hurriedly refilled both of their glasses.

I'd be a bad host if I didn't refill their drinks, but I can't keep up at the pace they're drinking! Seriously, wine isn't water!

"So, like, we're thinking... Why not have it at Commander's place? And we don't have anything to lose, so we ask 'im and he says yes! I couldn't believe it! He agreed just like that!" the bronze-haired woman revealed.

Hmmm? I think I heard something rather important just now.

"What's that? He agreed? Right away?" I asked, just to be sure.

"He sure did!"

"For once."

"I thought for sure he'd say no!"

So he basically invited them to come home with him, did he? They didn't just drop in without an invitation then. That's strange. What are you up to, Mr. Fisalis?

The party ended up continuing late into the night, despite their promise at the beginning, and all the knights were tossed—I mean, *allowed* to sleep in the (hastily prepared) guest rooms. The nicest guest room had already been set aside for the next day, but even with that one unavailable, the manor's accommodation capabilities were still great as ever! For a split second I was really glad that we cleaned the place, nook and cranny, on a regular basis.

I was exhausted by that time, having spent all day running around. Taking advantage of how drunk everyone was, I rushed through my good-nights and retired to my room.

It's not like I can sleep in tomorrow morning with my in-laws coming! Having

said that, I salute you, dear servants, for the overtime you're being forced to work. And I know it's wrong of me to ask this, but please let me go to sleep for now! I'll make it up to you all tomorrow, I said to myself, not really knowing who exactly I was making excuses to.

The next day:

"Gooooood morning!"

"What an invigorating one it is, too!" (✧ sparkle ✧)

Considering they had nearly drained our store of alcohol, the knights of the order all looked stunning the next morning and not a single one of them was hungover. I was, as they say, shook.

How the heck can anyone possibly hold their liquor that well!? Not to mention, they gobbled up Cartham's buffet breakfast (and they'd only just sobered up, too!) and are acting perky straight out of bed! Just watching them eat made my stomach threaten to act up on me.

Mr. Fisalis would go to work after my in-laws arrived, so his subordinates left for the Royal Palace ahead of him. They were out the door like they had been blown by a gust of wind.

Now that I've seen everyone off, all that's left is to clean up and get ready for his parents. Ooh, why don't I have some tea beforehand, though? I've got time for that, right? ...Oh, how I miss my carefree days when I could do that whenever I felt like. Come back to me, my lost days of relaxation!

"Master, Lord and Lady Fisalis have just arrived."

And just like that, my former guests were replaced with new ones.

Without any reason for it, I'd expected them to come closer to noon. When they arrived much, much earlier than I anticipated, I quickly grew worried.

"Did we have enough time to clean up? What about the rooms... the food..." I muttered, starting to turn pale.

"Everything's fine. No need to worry," Mr. Fisalis somehow managed to nonchalantly reply, standing beside me.

You think this isn't your problem!? We're only in this mess because you

brought your work home with you! ...The voices in my head might have been jeering at him on full blast, but nonetheless, I let him put his arm around my shoulder, and we headed to the entryway to greet my in-laws.

When we got there, all of the servants were lined up, too. It was going to be a superb group greeting.

“Welcome home!”

As soon as my in-laws came in the door, Mr. Fisalis, Lord Fisalis, and Rohtas said something about business to attend to and left to hide away in the study. In the meantime, I had tea with my mother-in-law in the salon.

“I was surprised how early you arrived,” I told her honestly.

“Oh, heh heh. We actually traveled here from close to the capital following some business talks. I’m certain we told Cercis...” she said, carefully leaving out the ‘didn’t he tell you?’ part. *Pfft, you’d expect him to tell me that?* She was being honest, so I wasn’t upset with her, though.

“Oh, ohh... that explains it.” *So he knew his parents would be coming this early. It’s looking more and more like he’s up to something.*

I was taken aback when she smiled and said, “I’m sorry for surprising you, just dropping in all of a sudden!”

Is she saying they just dropped by for no reason? I know she didn’t mean any harm, but we had to change all of our plans for them...

Feeling physically and emotionally drained, I slumped back into the sofa and let everything out.

“Goodness gracious, Vi? There there! I ought to apologize, but here, I’ve brought you a lovely souvenir! Anemone, bring it over,” Lady Fisalis called for her maid, as she took a seat next to me, flustered. Anemone cheerfully came over with a white, expensive-looking box in her hands.

“Here you go, Madam,” Anemone said to my mother-in-law.

“Thank you.”

Lady Fisalis showed me the box, saying, “It’s a pigeon blood ruby from one of

the mines in our territory. I thought of you when this little beauty was brought out, so I had this made for you!”

Sure enough, inside the opened box was a stunningly radiant, high-grade ruby.

I couldn’t believe my eyes! Well, yes, actually I could.

For sure, Lady Fisalis’ smile was even more radiant than the gem at that moment, though. I could practically see the words, ‘so happy I could die’ written across her beaming face. I felt my own face twitch in return until I managed to plaster a grin of my own across it.

I’ve had it with these nobles. How many times do I have to say that I don’t want any expensive gifts!? You all just keep lobbing fancy stuff at me.

“...Thank you kindly,” I told her, like the good girl I was.

Ugh, you can do this, be a good wife...

Cursing my shaking hands, I accepted the box from her!

22 — Enter the Bear

Some time later, Mr. Fisalis and the other men showed up in the salon.

Guess they're done with the business talk.

"Vi? What's the matter?" Mr. Fisalis asked, sensing that something was off about me as he gazed thoughtfully at my face.

It wasn't like I could just say, "I look like this because your mom gave me another expensive gift I don't want," so I said instead, "Lady Fisalis just gave the most wonderful gift. I'm just speechless! Ah ho ho ho!"

I handed Mr. Fisalis the box, which he accepted like being handed a literal ruby was an everyday occurrence before picking out the jewel with his fingertips and scrutinizing it from every angle.

"Ohhh, what a magnificent pigeon blood! It's been some time since we've seen one this nice, hasn't it?"

It really must have been rare and valuable for him to say that to Lord Fisalis with that pleased look on his face! Too bad I'm a pearls-before-swine kind of person—or maybe I should say, rubies before swine!

The ruby, held above its box between Mr. Fisalis' fingers, was absolutely flawless and seemed to glow with its own red light.

A gentle smile broke out across my father-in-law's face and he said, "I would have been fine selling it to the Royal Palace or a jeweler's shop, but when your mother said she wanted to see it on your wife, I brought it along as a souvenir."

Hearing that only made me twitch more. *This rock is valuable enough to present to royalty!?* I felt faint. *Am I to understand that they just up and decided to give it away as a souvenir instead!?*

"Considering its size, I think it would make for nice earrings rather than a necklace. Mimosa, contact our jeweler. I'll have him make some."

"As you wish."

Mimosa left, practically skipping in glee, to make arrangements with the jeweler like Mr. Fisalis told her. *She doesn't even try to hide how happy stuff like this makes her.*

"I suppose you will have to leave soon."

"Yes, unfortunately."

Not all that much time had passed, but it was getting to around when Mr. Fisalis and Lord Fisalis needed to start getting ready to leave for the Royal Palace, so they rose from their chairs and left the salon.

I stood next to Lady Fisalis in the entryway as we saw them off.

"Have a nice day at work!"

They told us they'd be home early before heading out, leaving Lady Fisalis and I to take care of things around the house.

She'd earlier said that she'd heard the cottage had been renovated and asked to see it, so I took her out to give her a little tour. I wasn't sure which parts had been changed and how, but she still seemed to like it, commenting, "It feels more natural and relaxed than it did before. Very nice! We'll have to stay here next time. Which reminds me, Vi, if you'd like some privacy while we're here, don't hesitate to come out to the cottage! I know I'll be doing the same."

Yup, that's exactly what it's for! And I'll certainly take you up on the offer.

The jeweler came by rather promptly that afternoon. *What sort of VIP treatment is this, coming over just a few hours after being contacted!?*

"Never in a million years... did I imagine I'd ever see a stone like this! It's magnificent!" The ruby was of such high quality that even the jeweler's hands trembled as he picked it up. *Well, his hands are shaking for a different reason than mine were.*

From that point onwards, Lady Fisalis and Mimosa were absolutely on cloud nine! They excitedly pored over design ideas and which other stones would best compliment it. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, so I let them do as they pleased (they were basically ignoring me anyway) until Lady Fisalis started to say "Ooh, we should have a dress made to go with this," at which point I could

no longer be a passive spectator and stepped in to nip that plan in the bud. *You can't leave these nobles alone even for a second!* This went on until late afternoon when Mr. Fisalis and Lord Fisalis returned from the palace.

“So what were you ladies up to today?” my father-in-law asked me over dinner.

“We took a look at the renovated cottage. It looks so lovely now! Seems like it would be a nice place to stay if we came to visit for a bit longer,” Lady Fisalis answered excitedly instead of me. I wanted to say something about her apparent plans for a long visit, but they really wouldn't have caused much of an issue if they were staying in the cottage.

“We certainly did make some drastic changes. It's almost like a completely new cottage. I'm sure you'll like it as well, Father. Please feel free to use it whenever you visit.”

“Is it really so different now? You'll have to show me, later,” Lord Fisalis and Mr. Fisalis went back and forth.

I'm not all that sure what changes were even made, so I'll just focus on my food. It looked like an assortment of Wahlish cuisine that night. The Wahl region is near the sea, so many of its dishes feature seafood, and it's known for its simple seasoning that really lets the flavor of the ingredients shine through. If I'm honest, it was pretty close to what I ate growing up in terms of simplicity, so I didn't have to worry about succumbing to gastrointestinal terrorism at a dinner like this. I could feel Cartham and his cooks' consideration in the way they reasonably portioned my food, too. *Much appreciated, guys! This grilled fish is so succulent and the accompanying warm veggies are delicious, too.*

I was quietly enjoying my steamy, flaky dish, when Mr. Fisalis suddenly motioned to me, saying, “So you'll show Father around the cottage, right, Vi?” causing me to nearly choke on my vegetables.

After that, everyone talked about what the jeweler had told Lady Fisalis and Mimosa. My mother-in-law was in an extremely good mood, her eyes sparkling, as she excitedly talked about designs and whatnot, so I just silently looked on.

Eventually our cheerful dinner ended and we had our after-dinner tea, and it began to feel like the day was winding down. I assumed my in-laws must be

exhausted, having only arrived just that morning. Not to mention I was exhausted too after the day I'd had *and* the one before it, as well.

No sooner had my in-laws followed Mr. Fisalis into the salon than Dahlia called out to me in a hushed voice.

"Madam, a word."

"Yes, what is it?" I replied back in an equally hushed tone, stopping in my tracks.

"Unfortunately, between yesterday's unexpected guests and all of the staff—and Rohtas—being so busy today, we haven't had the time to take a cot up to your room," she whispered in my ear apologetically.

"Huh? There's no cot?"

"I am terribly sorry, but yes, that's the situation."

Rohtas had been occupied making arrangements of some sort with Mr. Fisalis and his father since this morning, and then afterwards helping with meal prep. The servants, too, have been head-spinningly busy setting up for today in tandem with cleaning up after yesterday's party and the subsequent overnight guests. Moreover, sneaking a big cot from the storeroom up to my bedroom without Lady Fisalis noticing would be next-to-impossible now.

And so, for all those reasons, the ultimate result was that a cot hadn't been taken up to my room.

"Alas, I am subject to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," I groaned dramatically, crossing my arms. "It looks like I'll be sleeping on the sofa."

"You shall do no such thing!" Dahlia replied menacingly, leaving no room for argument on my part.

"Okaaay."

"...For mercy's sake, Master, you make things harder than they need to be..." Dahlia grumbled to herself, unbeknownst to me.

"...and that's why they haven't been able to bring up a cot. I'm very sorry."

I had just come back from showing my in-laws to their room for the night when Mr. Fisalis asked where the cot was. I repeated the explanation that Dahlia had given me earlier.

“You don’t need to apologize. We can just share the be—”

“No, I’m at fault for not keeping tabs on things, so I’ll sleep on the sofa!” I interjected. *The sofa is suuuper soft and comfy! My napping habit is proof of that. Hm? Why does he look disappointed?*

He only appeared glum for a second, however, before his brown eyes filled with energy anew and he found his voice, declaring, “I can’t let you do that! I’ll sleep on the sofa!” and offering me the bed like a true gentleman.

He says that, but I’m not convinced he could actually sleep there. His feet would hang off the end! ...That’s not a very good reason, though.

“No, no, please! Sleep in the bed! I’ll be perfectly fine on the sofa, heck, or even the floor...”

“If you sleep on the sofa, then I’ll sleep on the floor!” he still persisted.

Oh, so no one will use the bed? Genius move, a voice in my head said. You’ve been awfully brat—persistent today, Mr. Fisalis!

“Look, I don’t want you to have to sleep somewhere other than in the bed...” I tried one more time, sighing in exasperation.

“Okay, then you can share the bed with me!”

You have got to stop smiling when you say stuff like that. Well, this is it. This is where I fold. Meh, I’d be lying if I didn’t say this bed was stupidly huge. You could fit five people in it and still have room. There should be plenty of space to spare with just two.

“Fine. That side is yours then, and this one is mine. Neither of us can cross the middle line.” I laid a string down the center of the bed, creating a clear line of demarcation.

Perfectly centered!

“You didn’t have to put an actual line on it...”

Don't pout like that, Mr. Fisalis. You're a grown man.

"I do! I'm used to sleeping in the middle of the bed, so this way I won't unconsciously shift over to your side! Imagine you were renting a room out to a stranger—you wouldn't want them just wandering into your part of the house!"

"Renting to a..." he made another sour face, but this time I ignored him.

Just a string won't do any good if I roll over in my sleep, though. I couldn't live with myself if I intruded into his territory, I thought to myself as I racked my brains for a solution.

"Hmm, I don't think this will be enough. Oh, I know! Mimosa!" I called. She scurried over.

"...You got that? Thank youuu!" I whispered in her ear.

"Got it! I'll be back in just a moment!" she said back with a deep bow before exiting my room.

In the meantime, we took baths and changed into our night clothes. Of course Mr. Fisalis took his bath in the bathroom attached to *his* room. That was something we had decided on the last time. *There shall be no gray areas here!*

Mimosa returned with the goods while Mr. Fisalis was still in his room.

"Ah, this is it! Perfect!" I quickly took it from her and arranged it on top of the string line. Much better.

"This will make for a great physical barrier," I said to Mimosa as I looked over my brilliant solution with satisfaction.

"Oh, yes! It's very... impenetrable!" Mimosa nodded back. I wasn't sure what her hesitation was about, but I didn't dwell on it.

Mr. Fisalis came back from getting ready for bed while Mimosa and I were whispering to each other, pleased with our idea. He uttered but three words when he realized what was on the bed.

"...the bear figurine..."

"Yup! Now if I roll over in my sleep, I'll hit the bear. This way, I don't have to worry about intruding on your side!"

Yes, folks, it was the statue of the bear with a salmon in its mouth that we had received as a wedding gift, but which I just kept in the storeroom. I had suddenly remembered it, sitting there all by its lonesome, and decided that this was the night it would make its grand entrance! *Thank you, unknown wedding guest!*

Mr. Fisalis stared unblinkingly at the bear on the bed.

Gosh, is he really that tired?

"Today must've been very hectic for you. Are you going to go to bed soon?" I asked him. *I'm sorry we have to share a bed, but at least now with the bear here, you can sleep soundly knowing I won't encroach on your space!*

"...Yes."

I assumed my guess was correct based on how slowly he went around to his side of the bed.

"Well, good night then!" I told him before burrowing under the duvet on my own side.

"Good night..." Mr. Fisalis silently got into bed next to me.

The next day:

Mr. Fisalis was just barely on his side of the line, sound asleep with the bear in his arms.

That can't be comfortable; it's made of wood. And are those tear stains on his cheeks? He must've jabbed himself with one of the edges. Poor guy. Too bad he didn't have something softer to cuddle.

23 — A Well-Matched Pair!?

After my in-laws had breakfast with us—Mr. Fisalis oddly subdued, and me no different than normal—they left with big smiles on their faces, telling us, “We’ll see you next time! We’ll let you know we’re coming a little earlier, too!”

Yes, please, please do. We absolutely would like to know beforehand when you are coming. Do not, I repeat, DO NOT, just drop in on us!

What was it they even came here to do?

There was no way I could have known, given that I wasn’t privy to the details of Mr. Fisalis’ work or the family territory. He and Rohtas just told me that I ‘didn’t need to worry about it.’ *I assume whatever Mr. Fisalis and Lord Fisalis were talking about was important since Rohtas was with them, too, but all things considered, they didn’t stay for very long.*

“Was I wrong thinking they would be staying for longer?” I asked Mr. Fisalis as he stood next to me.

“They’re actually rather busy, despite appearances. They’ll probably be back again before too long, though. Look how much they liked the cottage,” he answered with a smile that seemed to be hiding some other feeling.

It won’t be as much of an issue if they stay in the cottage, but just in case, the first thing we’re doing next time is moving that cot into my room!

“I told Mother the cottage was supposed to be for *you*, but then she... urgh...” Mr. Fisalis mumbled, which I completely ignored.

After that, the days went by as peaceful (?) as ever.

Rozhe, the Royal Capital of the Flür Kingdom.

Weather: Rainy.

Rain.

Which meant the usual rainy day lessons.

My excitement for the day ahead of me plummeted as soon as I woke up that morning and heard the rain pouring outside. The clouds overhead certainly didn't help my mood, either.

Mimosa, on the other hand, seemed completely unaffected.

"Good morning! It's raining today, Madam! Let's get you dressed! What color will it be today? I think something bright—it'll help lift your mood." Despite the rain, she came to wake me humming a tune and full of lively chatter.

"Urgh, I have a headache. And my stomach hurts, too," I whined, praying my fibbing would pay off as I covered my head with the duvet.

"Don't be silly! You look fine to me!" she said back, paying me no attention. She then mercilessly yanked the duvet off of me before disappearing into the dressing room. It wasn't Mimosa's fault that she loved dressing me in regular clothes more than she did my maid's uniform, and poking and prodding... I mean, rubbing and scrubbing me down after my dance lesson (according to Dahlia). She was obviously on cloud nine that morning, so I didn't make a peep.

What lay ahead was another grueling dance lesson with Demonic Instructor Rohtas. He praised me for the progress I'd made, but he still held lessons to help me improve even further. How much did he want from me? I certainly wasn't aiming anywhere as high as him, but he was so, so different when he was in dance instructor mode, that I never brought it up out of sheer terror. I suppose I was quite the chicken.

"Master has the day off of work and is at home today. He says he'll be watching your dance lesson, Madam," Dahlia informed me just after I had sluggishly crawled out of bed, missing my last opportunity to give up.

"Oh, he did mention that last night at dinner. Even though he's never asked about my lessons before."

"You can use this as a chance to show him what you've learned," Dahlia suggested. *Is this why Rohtas has been such a slave-driver!? Was this the goal all along!?* I felt... differently, to say the least.

"Of course. I'll do my best." *No, it's not quite 'reaching for the stars,' but I'm out of options.* Honestly, I barely resisted the urge to just say nothing at all.

I changed into the dress Mimosa had picked out for me—a coral pink—and headed to the main dining room where I found Mr. Fisalis already seated and waiting. Naturally, since he didn't have to go to work, he was wearing casual clothes instead of his uniform. When I glanced over it, I saw that it was something that he bought on our date in town.

I might've chosen it on a whim (sorry, not sorry), but it looks fantastic and he looks really good in that outfit. I meant to choose the most mainstream style, but it really comes off as anything but boring. Dang it, now I'm jealous.

It didn't matter now, though. Mr. Fisalis smiled at me as I came into the dining room, his teeth bright white.

"Good morning. Figures it would rain on my day off. Had it been nice out, I thought it might be fun to go out on the town, again," he said, his grin so refreshing that it seemed to generate sunshine of its own... but I digress.

I couldn't help but think that going on another date so soon would be a waste of money, so I was actually kind of glad it was raining, at that moment.

"Good morning to you as well. You must be dreadfully bored then, with all this rain." My *schedule's still full, though*, I complained to myself reactively. Compared to my inner doom and gloom, however, Mr. Fisalis looked as happy as a clam.

"Not at all. You've got your dance lesson today, so I've got that to look forward to," he said with a smile.

"...I hope I can meet your expectations." *Great, now my brain feels rainy and gray, too.*

"On a one-two-three, one-two-three rhythm now"

I stepped in time with the crisp clap of Rohtas' hands. This was just step practice, so I was dancing alone. I was running out of breath keeping up with the rhythm, too, but since it was supposed to be an elegant ballroom dance, I had to hide it with a smile!

We were in the dance studio. I really couldn't believe the Fisalis family was wealthy enough to have a place like it in their house, but it was our usual spot

for practice and when necessary could also be used for orchestral performances and to host parties. *It's really quite impressive, not a waste of space at all, perfectly normal*, I tried to convince myself.

What I really want to do is stop to catch my breath right about now, but Demon Instructor Rohtas would surely object to that, not mention that Mr. Fisalis is in the audience today, so no way that can happen. I shall prevail!

I repeated the same steps as before until I felt like I'd go mad. My lessons had been going this way for some time, Rohtas' instructions growing more complex and difficult with each lesson. I was already at quite an advanced level.

But I haven't mastered anything yet! I told myself. I didn't say anything out loud though, focused as I was on my practice. My back was as straight as a rod and I had my mask of a smile firmly fixed in place when:

"Let me be her partner."

Mr. Fisalis broke his silence with the above remark, suddenly rising from his seat

What? You want me to dance with you!?

"Certainly. It's been a while since your last lesson; I think some partner practice will do you good," Rohtas agreed with a smile.

Mr. Fisalis took my hand in the center of the floor and awaited instruction. He looked so handsome standing at attention that I felt my heart race a little. I had only ever seen him dance twice, at the soiree at the Royal Palace and at the party at the Argenteia manor, but he was just as good at it as I remembered. I couldn't let on that I was embarrassed.

I'm so tired I could collapse, but I've got to give this my all!

We started to dance in time with the music Dahlia played on the piano. The tune was in an easy-to-dance-to major key and although it started slow enough, the tempo picked up in the middle.

"You're making quite a few mistakes, Master."

"Sigh..."

Rohtas is telling Mr. Fisalis that he's not doing very well, but I don't see it at

all. He's moving so elegantly and gracefully. He's very good, even as a lead, and nice to dance with, too.

Tragically, that impression didn't last long.

Perhaps twenty minutes later:

"Madam, your back!"

"Yes!"

"Master, watch your footwork!"

"Got it!"

"Smile, Madam!"

"Hmmp!"

Demon Instructor Rohtas relentlessly hurled command after command at the two of us. Mr. Fisalis seemed to be doing perfectly, as far as I could tell, but according to our diabolical dance coach, he 'had gotten rusty.' Rohtas' ruthless critique just didn't let up.

How much longer will we be here? How long can Dahlia keep playing, or Rohtas clap and criticize? He sure seems a lot more strict than usual today.

I was dancing with Mr. Fisalis, my feet moving frantically although my head was in a daze, when I heard a maid come into the room and call out, "Lunch is ready." Finally, my dance lesson was over. *Thank you, anonymous maid, you're my savior!*

"You need more practice, Master. On the other hand, Madam... you have made very good progress. I'll be going now, but please come back here after lunch," Rohtas said, praising me and absolutely annihilating Mr. Fisalis with a smile before ending the lesson and leaving the studio.

The breakneck atmosphere seemed to melt away into something much more mellow and exhausted.

"He was pretty tough today..."

"Yeah..." Mr. Fisalis replied as we both collapsed, dripping with sweat, on a

sofa. We sat back-to-back and exchanged petty grievances.

“Even you weren’t immune to being torn apart, huh? There’s more than meets the eye in dance.”

“Yeah, Rohtas doesn’t hold back,” he said over his shoulder, scoffing.

“He really becomes quite the demon when it’s time for dance lessons. He’s the one who has taught you from the start, right, Mr. Fisalis?”

“Yes, he has. And he’s been torturing me for as long as I can remember.”

“Heh. That does seem to be one of his areas of expertise, torture.”

“Ha ha ha. You think so?”

“Oh, for sure.”

“It wouldn’t be so embarrassing if I was able to keep up.”

“That’s true. You’ve got to develop muscle memory.”

“It’s really amazing that you *can* keep up with him. Good job,” he praised.

“Do you really think that?”

“Yeah.”

I don’t think I could hide how happy that made me.

“It felt like I was the one getting the lesson today,” he mused.

“I concur.”

“I can’t say I minded, though, since I got to be with you. It was fun, even if it was also kind of a nightmare.”

“Oh, really?” As soon as I replied, his weight against my back vanished. I toppled backwards at the sudden loss of stability. As I struggled to keep myself upright, I suddenly felt someone catch my shoulders. When I looked up in surprise, I saw that Mr. Fisalis had twisted around and was supporting me.

It’s amazing what a nice bone structure can do—even soaked in sweat, he still looks fresh and bright. And here I keep making a fool of myself blushing like this...wait, what? Why won’t my heart stop racing? Oh, right...it’s probably just all that exercise.

And then, with the sweetest smile on my face as he stared deep into my eyes, he said, “I hope you’ll practice with me again some time.”

“S-Sure... If you want...” I could only stutter in reply.

It looked like I had found someone to share the burden of Rohtas’ wrath during dance lessons with. That was the first time we had ever really clicked.

24 — The Rumor

From breaking an expensive vase, to having my in-laws drop in unexpectedly early, and even to Mr. Fisalis letting me put a bear statue in the bed, the past few days had been a flurry of activity—but finally, things had returned to normal. And now that a certain fiend wasn't around... I mean, now that Mr. Fisalis was out during the day, I could once again live my servant lifestyle to the fullest. A servant's uniform really did suit me better than a fancy dress!

I happened to run into some tradesmen while I was taking a break in the servants' dining room. Clothing and jewelry merchants and the like usually went straight to Rohtas' office, but those who dealt in food and drink came to the kitchen to negotiate with Cartham and listen to his input. That day was no different, with Rohtas, Cartham, and a tradesman going over this and that in the kitchen.

Ooh, I'm really looking forward to dinner tonight! Squeeing excitedly on the inside, I surveyed the scene as I kicked back in the dining room. The tradesman who was there sold foodstuffs from provincial towns and neighboring kingdoms, as well as local goods from the capital of course, so I figured he had been summoned to provide ingredients for more regional cuisines.

Having finished one transaction and about to move on to a new one, the friendly looking tradesman with a round face turned to us all sitting in the dining room and said with a smile, "Ladies! I've recently gotten some uncommon sweets from a neighboring kingdom."

His store carried not only perishables like vegetables and fruit but also spices and candies, and whenever he got in some rare delicacy, he would bring us some. As if on cue, Mimosa, the other maids, and I—all of us taking a break in the servants' dining room—crowded into the kitchen with shouts of "oh boy!" What he had for us that day was some sort of lemony baked good. They were soft, and were even shaped like lemons with tart lemon cream on the inside, making for a very refreshing bite.

“They look scrumptious! Lemon-flavored foods are so great,” I said in admiration, taking a whiff of the tart aroma wafting from the cake in my hand and sighing in delight. *Ahh, this smell gives me life!*

“That’s right, missy. And on top of that, these were made by a long-standing patisserie, so it’s guaranteed to taste good! I’m sure even the duke and duchess would enjoy them,” he said with a soft-hearted smile as I stared at the cake.

“I’m sure they would!” I answered nonchalantly, all the while thinking, *oh ho ho, the duchess is standing right in front of you* ☆

I’d met a lot of tradesmen and they always thought I was the new kid among the maids. I had a maid’s uniform on and my hair down, though, so I really did look just like an awkward young girl! In truth, however, I would have been in big trouble if word ever got out about what I was doing. But who would ever imagine that the lady of the house had been chilling in the kitchen wearing an apron? Rohtas was very proactive in making sure that the above-mentioned habits didn’t turn into gossip.

“Why don’t we have a bite to eat, since we’re taking a break anyway?” he suggested with a small smile. “Mimosa, bring us and the tradesman some tea.”

This was a common sight in the kitchen, I suppose. Since tradespeople often have to go to all sorts of places for their work, they’re usually well-traveled and in the know. This tradesman would probably find it very strange if he knew that I was the duchess. For the time being, however, he was very popular among the servants. That day, just like any other, he was sharing the newest juicy gossip from the provincial towns.

“That reminds me, I heard that the duke had bought a little house on the outskirts of the capital,” the trademan said, suddenly remembering.

“A small house?”

“Yep. A cozy little one surrounded by hedges. Or at least that’s what I overheard when I was visiting a customer of mine near there. Apparently the duke has been there several times. Wonder if he’s usin’ it as a second residence,” the tradesman nodded at Rohtas, who was listening with a look of suspicion. I saw his eyebrows climb ever so slightly higher, as if this was the first he’d heard of it, too. It was the faintest of changes in his expression, though, so

the tradesman did not notice, even though it was obvious to me.

Another cottage? Would he really go out and waste more money when he just renovated the one in the garden, I thought, thankful I was sitting in the tradesman's blind spot and he didn't notice my puzzled expression, either.

"They said they've seen him going in and out with a pretty young woman," the tradesman continued in a lowered voice, taking a quick peek through the doorway to the kitchen.

"What did you say!?" I swear I saw a vein pop when Mimosa said this. She stood up so quickly in her rage that she toppled her chair and looked as if she were about to grab the tradesman. *Her face! It's like a Halloween mask!*

As I unconsciously leaned away from Mimosa's fury, the maid sitting across from me spoke up.

"He broke up with his last companion. Do you think the new cottage is for that!?" she said through clenched teeth as the sound of her fist slamming into the table rang through the room. *Oh no, she's transforming into something else, too—just like Mimosa!*

In a split second, all of the maids (except for me) came alive with energy exclaiming, "Oh my gosh, it's his new lover!"

I was the only one who wasn't freaking out—externally anyway. On the inside, I was starting to panic over the chaos erupting in the dining hall, but I can't say I was terribly upset over some potential lover. I might as well have a sign over my head that said, 'this is my shocked face,' as the pandemonium played out around me.

"Ehhh, er, I, uh, this is only a rumor, so please, please keep it a secret from the duchess..." the tradesman stammered, looking awfully pale as he backed away from the chaotic scene before him.

Too bad the duchess is right here, buddy. Oh well, probably better that I don't reveal my identity right now.

The poor tradesman couldn't have known that his little tidbit of information would set everyone off like this. He mopped at his brow as he carefully avoided eye contact with anyone.

The maids were reeling in excitement (I suppose a better word might be 'fury'); meanwhile the tradesman looked like he'd rather be anywhere but there.

...I gotta do something to fix this problem.

Through all the pandemonium, I managed to make out the sound of someone clearing their throat.

"Authenticity of the matter aside, we are all going to drop the subject right now and never speak of it again. I have enough to worry about as it is without adding loose tongues to the mix... I have known you for a long time, my good man, but this cannot get out," Rohtas' unflappably cool demeanor, calm voice, and devastatingly blank expression cut straight through the chaos. More importantly, however, it was a firm threat directed at the tradesman. *Thank you, Rohtas!*

The tradesman upon whom Rohtas' ice-cold gaze had settled froze like a frog being watched by a snake, his face going stiff.

"Of-of course! I'll see to it that the rumor doesn't spread! And from now on, I'll report information to you first!" he vowed, sweating even harder. *Sir, your voice is cracking.*

"Very good. For now, though, I think it's best that you see yourself out," Rohtas said to the tradesman with a cold look, pointing to the exit. The tradesman nodded repeatedly, his brow shiny with sweat and his face pale.

"Yes, yes, I think I will! Thank you for your patronage!" the tradesman replied, only seeming to partially understand, before gathering up his things and making a break for the door.

He really got himself in over his head. Then again, he couldn't have known that the duchess was among the servants he was talking to. All it was was gossip, I doubt it was anything he needed to be that panicked about.

At any rate, this new rumor raised suspicion that Mr. Fisalis had a new mistress.

25 — In the Kitchen

For the first time in quite a while, a shockwave tore through my peaceful life at the duke's manor. Rumor had it that Mr. Fisalis had purchased a villa on the outskirts of the capital and was seeing a beautiful woman there. Miss Calendula's sudden attacks were nothing compared to this!

What the tradesman said was nothing more than a rumor, yes, but the rage that it caused among the servants when they heard it was so intense that I could barely get a word in edgewise and could only watch in panic. After the tradesman left, the anger directed at Mr. Fisalis only exploded.

"To think he'd pull a stunt like this right after he finally broke up with his companion and started taking his role as duke seriously!"

"Didn't he learn his lesson last time when the last mistress rained fire and brimstone on us!?"

"Does he *enjoy* disrespecting his lovely wife!?" The servants raged, the angry electricity in the air increasing as they went back and forth amongst themselves. If they got any angrier, I worried they'd sprout horns.

This is all just hearsay at the moment, too, so we don't even know for sure if it's true... It already seems like this is a foregone conclusion among the servants, though. Just how little faith do they have in Mr. Fisalis?

There was little I could do besides try to force myself to be optimistic. For the time being, I just watched how it played out.

"It's still too early to be jumping to conclusions, you lot," Rohtas interrupted the maids from where he had been watching in silence.

"How can you be so calm after hearing that!? Where there's smoke, there's fire, after all!" one of the maids challenged him, even though he was behaving true to character.

"That does not mean that the interpretation we heard was factual. Please calm down. I will look into it, since, if it does turn out to be true, and measures

will have to be taken. Until then, be mindful of what you say... Madam might be listening.”

“Oh...!”

As soon as Rohtas casually pointed out that I was listening, all sets of eyes were on me and the maids shut their mouths in embarrassment. Truthfully, though, it was unbearable to see them so concerned as I realized they were all staring intently at me.

“Oh! Don’t worry about me! I’m just fine!” It was just as unbearable trying to emphasize how much I wasn’t bothered, too. Let’s just leave that memory aside for the time.

I’m pretty sure if the info’s correct, we’d have to make some hard decisions, just like Rohtas said. And considering this is Mr. Fisalis we’re talking about, he’d probably show off a new girlfriend at parties and whatnot, not try to hide her away. I mean, let’s be real, he does have a prior history of doing exactly that.

He’s the type that can’t help but fall head-over-heels for someone, so it wouldn’t take long for him to start thinking with his libido instead of his brain. And depending on this new woman’s social status, she might simply be just a girlfriend... but if she’s a noblewoman, it’s possible he could try to bring her in as a new wife... wait, what!? That would mean I’m getting sacked! Grrr, I shouldn’t be acting like this doesn’t concern me!

Is he going to revise our contract again? Will he flat out annul our marriage? What the heck am I supposed to do?

“Madam?” Mimosa asked worriedly, looking at me as I let myself get lost in my thoughts. Contrary to ‘just fine,’ I realized that I had come to a fork in the road of my life, and my mind had run wild with that new information.

I snapped back to reality at the sound of Mimosa’s voice.

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about something. I agree with Rohtas. I’ll have him investigate. We can work it out after that.”

Mimosa stared back blankly for a second before fixing a smile on her face and giving Rohtas a nod.

“I’ll start the investigation at once,” he said, politely averting his gaze and bowing.

“Thank you.” I nodded back.

Rohtas quickly turned and left the servants’ dining room. His pace was faster than normal, so although he appeared calm on the surface, perhaps he had something on his mind. The tension still lingered in the dining room even after he’d left.

The mood’s no longer angry and chaotic, but I can sense that the servants are still overly concerned about me... It’s really uncomfortable in here, so I’d probably better do something to lighten the mood.

But just as I opened my mouth to speak up, having prepared myself for the worst, the sound of light clapping from the door to the kitchen filled the dining room.

“There, there, ladies. If you keep frowning like zat, your faces will become stuck zat way. Can’t you see that you have troubled Madame? Let’s have a smile, then!” a bright voice called out.

All at once, all eyes turned to Cartham who had been standing silently next to Rohtas before Rohtas left. He had been leaning against the stove with his arms folded, quietly watching the scene in the dining room before he intervened to smooth things over. Of course, he was wearing his signature indulgent smile, too.

Thank the heavens, my savior has arrived! I think I can even see a halo shining around his face!

“Cartham!” I sent him a look hopefully full of my thanks to him for clearing the air.

“Rohtas said he’d look into it, so just let him take care of it. Everything will be fine, Madame!” He reassured me with an exaggerated bow, hand over his heart and a broad smile on his face. He didn’t hug me that time, so it seemed Mr. Fisalis’ physical contact ban was still in play, but Cartham’s bright energy and cheerful tone just drained all the tension out of the air.

As the mood in the room became more pleasant, the servants, too, calmed

down.

“Yeah, alright.”

“I’m sure Cartham’s right.”

“We can raise hell *after* we find out if the rumor is true.”

They shrugged their shoulders and I saw the bloodthirsty looks in their eyes soften as they returned to normal. *What that one girl said at the end was a little concerning, though. Oh well, apart from that, I’m glad I could count on Cartham to calm everyone down! The older, the wiser, I guess!*

With everyone now more or less back to their normal selves, I felt like I could breathe again. *Much better now that all that tension is—*

“And then he shouted, ‘In fact, I think you’re better for me!’, right?” One maid said, imitating Mr. Fisalis through stifled giggles.

“Oh, yeaah, back when his companion busted in, and he broke up with her,” another maid replied through snickers of her own, nodding.

What are you—Hold a second? Why are bringing that incident up again now? Triggered by the maids’ antics, my cheek began to quiver with a renewed sense of dread.

“Yup, and then he said he was leaving his companion for Madam.”

“‘Let’s sit down and talk again, so we can have a real marriage,’ I think he said.”

“Eeee! I had no idea he was so possessive!”

“Oh, you bet! He even picked her up so she wouldn’t run away.”

“Oh gosh! He must really be in love with Madam!”

At some point, fortunately, the maids’ depressing start to the conversation morphed into something more lighthearted. I, on the other hand, was rapidly getting fed up with this. *Why am I thinking about this now, of all times?*

The girls went on, completely immersed in their recollections of that fateful day. It was a little... okay, no, it was pretty embarrassing.

“I don’t think I had ever seen him that talkative before,” one of them grinned.

“Oh, totally. I agree a hundred percent.” A few of the maids nodded back with self-satisfied looks.

Hold on. How is it that they have every single word he said memorized? And why do they look so excited about it? And, sure, things felt awkward just a moment ago, but is it getting warm in here, or is it just me? ...I didn't think I was into humiliation.

“...I'm just gonna head back to my room...” I said, deciding to make a break for it when I started to feel a little light-headed from all the embarrassment. Just as I rubbed my eyes to try to clear my head, though:

“Are you alright, Madam!? Please, get some rest!” the maids all said at once, effectively cutting short their little reenactment (to be honest, it had started to enter the realm of pure fantasy). They rapidly entered work mode and began to try to dote on me—let me pull your chair out for you; here, I'll hold open the door; give me your dishes to put away—while I could only look on in amazement as they quite literally carried me to my room. The big finale was a ‘if there's anything you need, don't hesitate to ask!’ complete with resplendent smiles.

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Asides, No. 4: Behind the Scenes — from Rohtas' Perspective ◆ ◆ ◆

This tradesman cannot possibly know that Madam is sitting right in front of him, but even still, gossiping in here of all places is simply careless. It could result in a serious scandal for the Fisalis family.

Madam seems shaken, but the maids appear to have eagerly accepted the opportunity to speak ill of their master. I cannot just stand by while this mess unfolds right before Madam's eyes. I will have to have a word with them later. For the time being, I need to ascertain the validity of this rumor.

I gave the maids a warning before I took leave of Madam and left the kitchen. I knew Madam would be in good hands with Dahlia; the woman was the most level-headed of anyone there.

I was on my way to the greenhouse. Upon quietly opening the door, I called out for the man I was looking for.

"Bellis, I have a job for you," I announced bluntly, my chocolate-brown eyes surveying the scene. The gardener was a clever man and would not need further clarification.

"I understand. Spies."

"Three... maybe four."

"Yes."

Bellis gave me a small nod and disappeared into the garden.

He'll be at my office in just a few minutes with his apprentices, no doubt, so I'd best make haste there myself.

Just as I anticipated, I had but a moment to spare when I returned to my office before Bellis appeared with his 'spies.' Although they usually worked as gardeners, those lads actually functioned as a hidden defense system for the Fisalis family.

“One of our regular tradesmen came in today with a rumor that Master has purchased a house on the outskirts of the capital and is keeping a mistress there. I want to know if there is any truth to this,” I briefly explained.

“That seems unlikely, considering how Master has been acting lately,” Bellis replied, incredulous. Even Bellis himself had the mind of a spy.

“I agree with you, but where there’s smoke, there’s fire, as they say. So for the time being, we must investigate.”

“You’re right.”

“I will contact you as soon as I find any evidence against Master, so work as quickly as you can.”

“Understood.”

“Thank you.”

Bellis and his spies nodded silently and left my office.

Just as Bellis said, Master has been desperately trying to win Madam’s love as of late, so I cannot help but wonder if this is a false report. The possibility that it may be something we need to quash, however, means that investigation is the only way to know for sure.

I suppose I’ll need to have a word with that tradesman, too... for causing our most beloved Madam distress!

26 — Suspicion

I had gone back to my room, but the maids' pretend playback of my showdown with Miss Calendula left me feeling positively drained and dejected. I approached my bed, shuffling my feet and slumped in exhaustion like some sort of zombie and performed my slowest cannonball to date. I hoped its silky, fluffy embrace would recharge my battery.

First things first: relaaax. Better not get too comfortable, though, or else I'll never get out.

Just as I was really feeling the magic healing powers of my thousand thread count sheets and down pillows, I heard Dahlia call out to me somewhat anxiously.

"Don't be discouraged, Madam. Rohtas is looking into it as we speak."

I wasn't sure if I felt discouraged so much as...

I just want to be left alone for a little while longer. I suddenly have a lot on my mind, is all. I can't relax out there knowing all the maids and servants are scrutinizing me.

I wanted a place where I could be alone, and for a split second I even considered running away. A lightbulb went off in my head.

Wait a second... I do have a place like that! The cottage! It's been updated specifically to suit my tastes, and Mr. Fisalis said I could use it however I liked. Even Mother Fisalis said that it's okay to hide away sometimes.

It's perfect for someone like me who needs an escape but has nowhere to go. There's a bed there that's just as comfy as this one, and if I get sick of thinking, I've even got a bunch of books nearby! Allons-y!

Once I had made up my mind to do that, everything else sort of just fell into place.

I squirmed out of bed and told Dahlia (who was waiting nearby), "I'm going to

the cottage for a little bit. I'd like to be left alone for a while."

Dahlia did not try to stop me, only raising her eyebrows ever so slightly and quickly replying, "Very well. I'll go with you to prepare some tea and sweets."

And so I set out for the cottage with Dahlia after I changed out of my uniform and into a casual dress.

The cottage was well-kept by the maids with not a speck of dust to be found and ready to be used at any time. *Wow, the servants don't miss a thing!* There I was, applauding, all by myself in the cottage.

The tradesman's arrival this morning had been like a bomb detonating in the manor, but I've only just eaten lunch, so it's still a bit early for tea. My afternoons are usually spent wandering around the manor or pulling weeds in the garden, but I just don't have the motivation to do either today.

Bad days happen even to the best of us, I thought to myself. *I'll just suck it up and stay inside.*

Dahlia seemed worried while she was there, but briskly prepared the tea without a peep nonetheless.

"It's good to get away and relax by yourself sometimes. I can bring you your dinner here, if you'd like, just ask," she said before quietly taking her leave.

It's been a long time since I felt truly alone. Ever since I came to this manor, someone's always been nearby, and not just Dahlia or Mimosa. This is how I like it best, I thought, relieved.

I plopped down—I mean, carefully sat down on the sofa and took a deep breath, trying to take advantage of the solitude.

I know I said it's still too early for tea, but Dahlia took the time to make it for me, and I really just want to relax.

Deciding I'd like a drink, I spotted the tea set Dahlia had prepared for me and saw that she had brought several kinds of black, herbal, and medicinal teas. I wasn't sure why she brought medicinal teas, but the fact that she'd carefully considered my preferences when selecting the others made me feel warm inside. It felt like a motherly thing to do, and I hadn't felt that feeling in a long

time. No, my real mom was never this considerate. At best she'd just laugh it off and tell me to go to bed if I was so stressed.

I chose a chamomile and boiled some water.

There, I can think things over while I drink it. Oh, I know! A siesta! (Like mother, like daughter, I guess.)

I began to make my tea.

So he bought a little villa and has a young mistress there? I thought older women were his type, but one can always broaden their horizons.

If the rumor turns out to be true, Mr. Fisalis has been very diligent. He'd have to have been stopping to meet this mistress in secret on the way home from work.

"...But when has he had the time to do that?"

Since breaking up with Miss Calendula, he comes straight home nearly every day and on the few days off he's had, he's been at the manor or out on a da—Ahem, taking me shopping. We haven't gone to any evening parties lately, either (besides those two a while back, thank goodness). Could he be like one of those fathers who say, "I'll be back in a while, I'm going out hunting," but he's really going to meet a clandestine lover?Hmm, no. He's never had an excuse like that, has he? He has gone on business trips, but the fact that he's gone with the other knights makes for an airtight alibi.

The more I thought, the less I understood. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more it felt like he was somewhere nearby. *That's weird.*

In any case, if he somehow has the time to be courting some mistress, then he'd have to be doing it during work hours! The audacity that would take! The only other option is that he's doing all this while on the job. I'd be awfully worried if my commander was doing that! Oh, I don't know if commanders patrol the city. That's right, Mr. Fisalis said he's in the army division.

...Oh dear, look at me, I nearly convinced myself that Mr. Fisalis is a bad guy. Ah ho ho ho ☆ Given the circumstantial evidence, there's no doubt that he's anything but.

“Hmmm. I still don’t know what to think of it...”

Oh, bother. I might as well be asleep, that’s how far I’ve gotten.

I had a feeling that if I kept trying to think about it, I’d only make things worse.

I’ll just wait for Rohtas’ findings. They say good things come to those who wait, so wait I shall. I’ll take a little nap here.

Unclear whether I’d actually come to any sort of conclusion, I put the tea tray back in order and flopped onto the bed. It was my first time lying in it, but it was no less fluffy or comforting than the one in my room, and I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep in the blink of an eye.

Some time must have passed when I felt myself being shaken. Rather vigorously, I might add.

“Wha-huh? What’s this, an earthquake? What are my parents gonna do if their house falls down?” I blurted out, still half asleep as I sat up unsteadily.

“What? There’s no earthquake. Viola, wake up!” said a voice, even though I was certain I was the only one in the cottage. Some man’s voice.

Some man? No, this is—

It was hard to focus at first having just been woken from a deep sleep, but as I woke up little by little, the person’s silhouette came into focus.

“Hiiiiieeh! Mr. Fisalis!” In my shock, I let out a very unladylike screech.

The scene was a suspiciously familiar one: I awoke to Mr. Fisalis’ chiseled cheekbones and sparkling eyes mere inches from my own face. I really, really would have liked him to never do that again lest I suffer further cardiac damage... ahem, I mean, speak of the devil, the most talked-about man around the manor was right in front of me.

Mr. Fisalis didn’t seem to mind the noise I let out, though, in fact, he suddenly picked me up and carried me out of the room. I hastily wrapped my arms around his neck, startled at the sensation of suddenly being up in the air.

“I heard what happened from Rohtas, so let’s just go now!” he said,

quicken his step, eyes focused forward. There was no sign of his usual smile, his jaw tight and expression grim. I didn't feel like I could refuse.

"What? Right now? Where?"

It was already dark outside the cottage; I had been asleep for quite a long time. *Where could we be going at this hour?*

"To the place in question!"

"The place in? Ohhh..." *There? We're going there?*

"It's not easily accessible by carriage, so we'll go on horseback. Hold on to me—don't let go," he replied in a somewhat irritated tone and, sure enough, it was the carriage porch by the door to the manor where we ended up. Waiting there for us was Mr. Fisalis' favorite and beautiful black horse, Rohtas holding its lead.

He tossed me up on the horse so quickly I nearly fainted, before getting on behind me and taking off at such a breakneck speed mere seconds later that I barely had time to wrap my arms around him and hang on for dear life.

I assumed we had arrived at our destination when he finally halted the horse.

This isn't how I pictured my first time riding a horse. This is going to leave mental scars, I'm sure of it! It wasn't the horse's fault, though, I'm fine with horses; it was just the insanely rough ride.

He helped me down, but when I tried to stand, my legs were shaking so hard that I couldn't! *There was no need to go that fast!* When he saw how I staggered, he just went back to carrying me. I can't say that I minded, considering I could barely stand, and once I had my wits about me I had the presence of mind to wonder where we were as I looked around. Under the heavy veil of night, however, it was impossible to tell.

I could make out a small house before me in the light spilling from the windows of other nearby houses.

Is this 'the outskirts of the capital' that the tradesman was talking about?

"Er, is this the... the house they say you've been sneaking away to?" I asked Mr. Fisalis nervously.

He answered, "Yes. And it's vital that its existence remains a secret from now

on. That means you'll need to keep it a secret, too."

He still has that super serious look on his face. And there are a lot of ways I could interpret that 'vital that its existence remains a secret.' Just what I need—some new surprise to weigh on my mind!

"Are you really sure I should have come, then?"

"You're the only person I'd consider bringing. You'd never go and carelessly disclose a secret as big as this to a stranger."

"That's true... I guess...?"

His expression finally softened just a bit at this. The tense feeling in the air abated as well, and I felt like I could breathe again.

I still think he's giving me way too much credit. How could I disclose a secret to a stranger when I barely have any contact with outsiders to start with? He's got nothing to worry about, though, considering that's not even how this rumor started. But now that he's told me like this, I definitely can't tell anyone else! Well played, Mr. Fisalis, well played.

"Let's go, then," he said, starting to walk towards the house after glancing around for a moment.

Upon closer inspection, although the house was definitely well-kept, it wasn't particularly ostentatious. It was actually rather dreary. *It sure doesn't look like somewhere you'd expect to find a young woman.*

"We're coming in now." My anxiety returned full force when he said this.

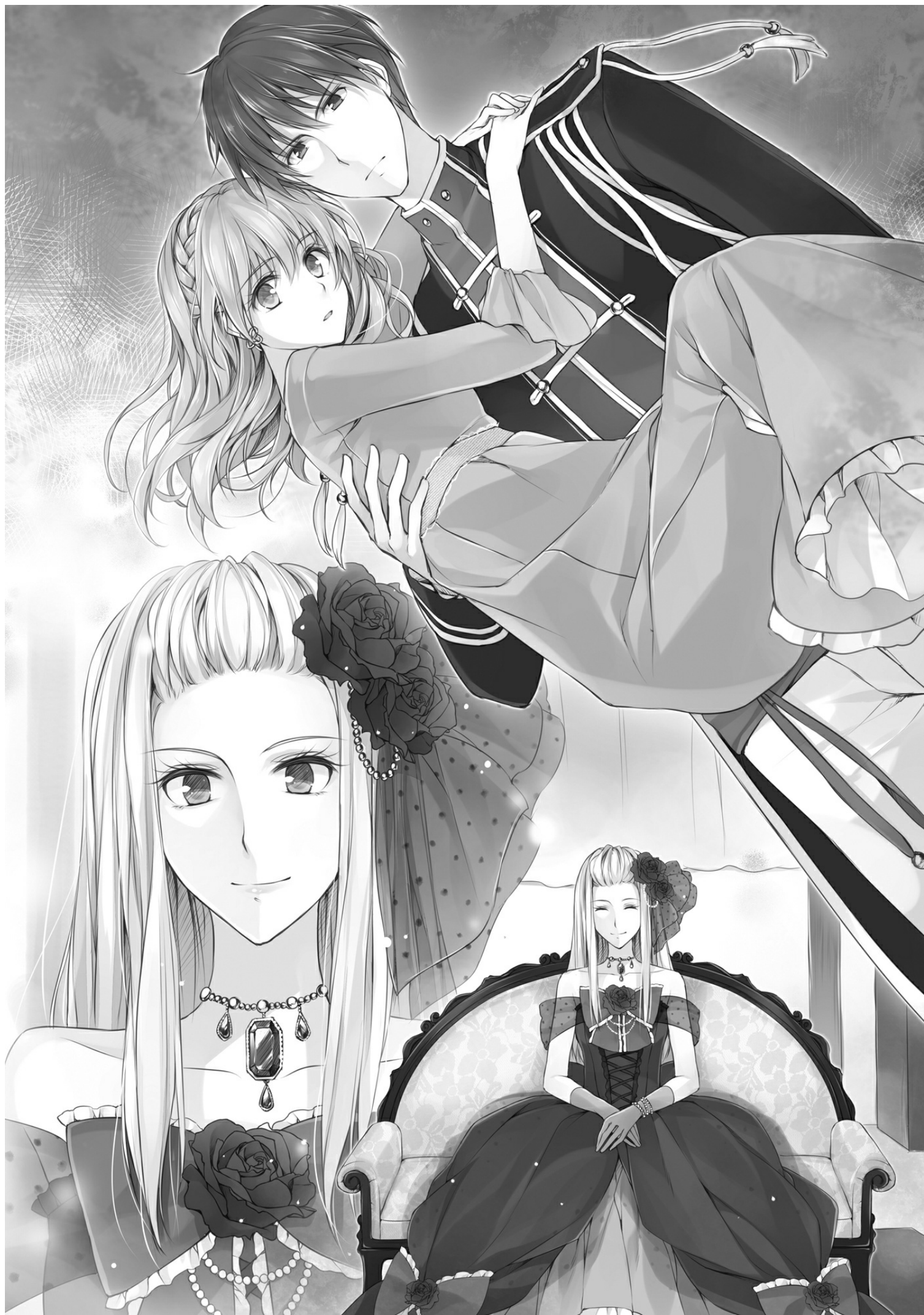
Am I going to have to confront a new mistress? I wondered, steeling myself even as he held me in his arms.

The door opened from the inside at the sound of his voice, and beyond it lay a tidy living room, just as bland as the outside of the house. There weren't even any decorations, not even so much as flowers. There were, however, six or seven people already inside. I was startled, as I hadn't been able to see them from the outside.

There were men dressed as servants standing along the wall, as well as a woman who appeared to be a maid. Seated on the sofa was a young woman

wearing exactly the kind of fancy dress that didn't appeal to me. She was exceptionally beautiful and I found myself unable to tear my eyes away from her.

Even just her loose, silvery hair cascading down her back gave the impression that she was wearing a radiant tiara. Her blue eyes were fixed on me, crinkled in what looked like delight, but they also hinted at some cleverness hidden in their depths.



You like perceptive types then, Mr. Fisalis?

At any rate, she was absolutely flawless from head to toe.

I realized then that everyone's eyes had converged on me. I, meanwhile, was still nestled in Mr. Fisalis's arms like a new bride.

Ohhh yeahhh. I'm the center of attention.

...Pffft, as if I'd ever think that.

Their stares were not harsh, and instead I got the sense that they were welcoming. *By all appearances, she's a young lady of status confined to a villa for some reason! Oh, looks like I've confirmed that Mr. Fisalis does, in fact, have a mistress.*

Guess I'm going to be relieved of my duties soon!

27 — Wiping Away Any Doubt

What is he thinking, carrying me in to meet his (assumed) mistress!?

“M-Mr. Fisalis! You can put me down now!” I said, squirming. First things first, I wanted out of that embarrassing position ASAP so I could stand on my own two feet.

“Don’t wiggle around like that; I might drop you,” he said back calmly, only to hold me even tighter.

Ugh, someone do something to get these boa constrictor arms off me! Is he holding me like this to try to make his (assumed) mistress jealous? I don’t want any part in your romance novel cliches! Then again, I’m sure that to everyone else in the room, my earnest attempt at escape here just looks like a wife trying to get frisky with her husband... Great, now it’s even more awkward.

I had just given up hope of ever escaping Mr. Fisalis’ grip under the increasingly awkward knowledge that everyone—including the (assumed) mistress—was staring right at me, when:

“Hee hee, how long has it been since we last spoke, Madam?” the (assumed) mistress tittered at me.

Ugh, saying ‘assumed’ all the time is a pain in the butt. Let’s just assume she is his mistress.

But what did she mean by that? That’s something you’d only say to someone you’d met before. And on top of that, she doesn’t seem at all jealous of Mr. Fisalis and I, even after seeing him carry me in; her voice was perfectly calm. Back when the showdown between Mr. Fisalis and Miss Calendula unfolded, anyone with eyes could see that Miss Calendula wasn’t happy to see me, but this new mistress is positively beaming.

...Honestly, she’s scarier than Miss Calendula.

I timidly met the mistress’s gaze and looked right back at her. *Please forgive me for staring at you like some weirdo.*

“Eh? Since we last spoke?” I repeated her words, unsure what she meant. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn’t recall having ever met her.

The lady tilted her head to one side—I could only imagine the question marks swirling around her head in confusion. Still, though, she did not seem to take offense at my staring and replied, “Indeed. Oh, this just won’t do! Do you really not notice anything?” Her captivating smile widened even farther as she looked back at me.

I would never forget a face as dazzling as hers—I could nearly see stars shimmering in the glow of her skin. I was ab-so-lute-ly certain that I had never met this lady. *I’ve grudgingly been taken out to socialize in recent months, but other than that, I’m basically a shut-in, so I can count my acquaintances—much less friends—on one hand! ...Yeahhh, that’s not something I’m going to say out loud, though.*

Which was why I was sure the mistress must have been mistaken.

I nervously peeked up at her. “Um, no, I’m quite sure this is my first time making your acquaintance...”

“I’m sorry, but you are mistaken, Madam!” the mistress denied again, despite my insistence to the contrary. “Ah, maybe this will help.” Her face lit up, and as I watched on, she gently pulled back her silvery hair into a single voluminous bundle, picked up a nearby string, and nimbly tied up her hair.

Nooo, you’ll damage your beautiful hair if you tie it with that rough, dry cord! I know now really isn’t the time for heckling but still.

I was enchanted by the practiced, flowing manner in which she handled her hair, but once she had it completely tied back, I was suddenly hit with a sense of déjà vu. It was not some soiree or party where we had met, and she had not looked quite so ladylike when we did. She was just as dazzling then, but more gallant and... *Oh!*

“You’re a knight! One of Mr. Fisalis’ subordinates!?” I said much louder than I’d intended, with just a dash of hysterics. She was the lady knight with silver hair who worked under Mr. Fisalis! I *had* met her, along with the rest of the Bombshell Trio, several times, but at the time she was wearing her uniform and had her hair pulled back! The image of her in my mind perfectly aligned at that

moment with the sight of the ‘mistress’ before me. *Bingo!*

As I stood there gobsmacked by her total transformation, helpless but to stare at her, she said, “That’s right, Madam. I’m glad you finally remembered!” I could hear only the rustle of her clothes as she elegantly stood up, put her hand to her chest, and bowed in a typical knightly fashion. She couldn’t have been anything but a knight, looking at her now.

Oh, now that I know her true identity, I should stop thinking of her as the ‘mistress.’ Seeing her act all dashing in a dress makes my heart race in an entirely new way, though! ...Uh, oh. Now’s not the time to be thinking about how good she looks crossdressing. Wait, this isn’t crossdressing—this is probably what she normally wears... but maybe not!

“Mr. Fisalis’ new girlfriend was you?” He’s been cheating on me with someone from work!? I sure never saw this coming. And she had said that she’s married, too, so now it’s double cheating!

The lady knights did suggest that even though they liked him as their boss, there was something about how he acted in private. Was she just pretending to not be interested in him back then?

When she realized that my imagination was running buck wild, the lady knight hurriedly said something, to which a frustrated voice off to my side replied:

“You’ve got it all wrong! You already know she’s married, and I wouldn’t have brought you in the first place if I was actually keeping a mistress here!”

It was Mr. Fisalis whose voice cut through my crazy thoughts. For once I was grateful he was so persistent.

“I, um, but...?” I stuttered as I looked at the two of them, still unable to comprehend what was happening.

“She’s not the only one here. Take a good look around,” Mr. Fisalis urged.

What does he mean?

I looked over the servants and maid once again...

Oh.

“Pfffwah!? You’re all knights!?” Is this a second surprise raid? *Did they break*

in? No, wait, she wouldn't have said hello if that was the case! And hold on, the maid is the lady knight with bronze hair!

The knights' appearances had only changed slightly (I guess), but I still hadn't had any idea it was them. I was already so befuddled by everything that at that point I seriously began to wonder if I was under some sort of spell. *Is this some kind of joke!?*

I must have looked supremely confused, because Mr. Fisalis eventually spoke up (in a less frustrated tone) and asked me, "You see? You're well-acquainted with everyone here, right?"

One would think that this would wipe away any doubts as to whether he was hiding a mistress here, but on the contrary...

"They could all be in on it..." I muttered, putting my hand to my jaw in contemplation.

"Wh—Huhhh!?" Now it was Mr. Fisalis' turn to look shocked.

"What!?"

"C'mere."

"She thinks *what!*?"

"...She doesn't believe him at all..." all the knights started to murmur among themselves, too. They, too, were all open-mouthed in shock.

However.

"Showing me all... this still doesn't give me any proof that your lady knight was the 'mistress' you were sighted with."

"...Please don't say something that cruel with such a cute look on your face..." Mr. Fisalis said in an exhausted voice, hanging his head. But them's the facts.

"It's possible that you got the knights to work with you to hide any evidence of your real mistress, right"

"Would I need to do something of this scale to do that!?"

"Um... I'm going to have to investigate that further, so for now I will not be taking anymore questions at this t—"

“Then let me give you some answers! This is important! What you see here isn’t some coverup. I’m trying to explain, so will you please hear me out?”

“You are? ...Okay.”

The look on his face as he begged me was one of pure desperation, so I decided to put my investigation on hold.

28 — Explanations, Confessions

“Alright, so. First of all. We *are* at the edge of the city, just like you said. But I can’t tell you exactly where, for your own good,” Mr. Fisalis prefaced his explanation.

Released from Mr. Fisalis’ freakishly strong snake arms, I was shown to the sofa where the lady knight had been sitting and took a seat myself. Mr. Fisalis then sat down next to me, seemingly doing his best to leave absolutely no space between us. The knights told us they’d give us some privacy and all went into the next room. *That was thoughtful of them.*

“We use this house as a base of operations. Although this area is within the limits of the capital, we’re unlikely to be recognized because it’s far away from the city center. That’s why I’m able to come and go around here under the guise of a spendthrift merchant who has just purchased a villa. It hasn’t gotten out to the neighbors that I’m Duke Fisalis, but... That tradesman went and made you panic over nothing.”

I understood that it must have been a tricky subject for him to talk about, considering it involved his work, but he really chose a watered-down way to explain it to me.

“I wouldn’t say I was panicking...” *On the contrary, I felt nothing at all.* I couldn’t tell him that, of course, so I said nothing and stared back at him intently.

“I’m sorry that I made you worry over something so trivial. Oh, right. My word alone isn’t proof that the ‘mistress’ the tradesman saw me with was one of my colleagues, so... Rohtas!” he called, turning to face the door leading outside.

Huh? Did he just say ‘Rohtas’?

And what do you know? A ‘yes’ came from the other side of the door, just before said door opened to reveal none other than our amazing butler Rohtas!

He must have left the manor right after we did.

“Rohtas!” I shot up from the sofa in surprise, but Mr. Fisalis yanked me back down.

Rohtas smiled amicably when he saw us. Once he was sure the door was shut, Mr. Fisalis turned and told him, “Tell Viola what you found out.”

“As you wish,” Rohtas nodded and then, retrieving a letter from his breast pocket, began to read. “Upon my thorough investigation, I concluded that the locale and the young woman described by the tradesman directly corresponded to this building and one of your female knights, respectively.”

He went on to explain in detail what happened when and who saw what, but I didn’t pay much attention. I didn’t know if anyone was surprised, but I was thoroughly impressed that he’d managed to find out as much as he had in just that one afternoon.

“...So what do you say? We have witness testimony, too, if you’d like to hear that,” Mr. Fisalis said, after he’d listened quietly to what Rohtas had to say. Rohtas, meanwhile, took the time to put the letter back into his breast pocket.

So in other words, this whole scandal was nothing more than a disguise for Mr. Fisalis’ job.

“Hmm, Rohtas said the same thing you did... sooo, I believe you.” I wouldn’t trust anyone but Rohtas himself and his lawn maintenance-cum-recon unit! They’re certainly worthy of my trust!

“Oh, thank god! I couldn’t focus on my work knowing that you distrusted me! I’m so relieved!” Finally, a smile broke out across Mr. Fisalis’ face.

The tense atmosphere that seemed to have followed me all that day melted away and I let myself sink back into the sofa with a sigh of relief. My doubts had been wiped away... and yet.

“That must be the understatement of the century. Is it really alright that you told me this secret now?” *Isn’t all of his work stuff super top secret, I mean?* Now I was getting nervous about the gravity of the information I’d been handed. *Was he forced to reveal information about his job to me, a common civilian? Wouldn’t he get in trouble for that? Could they fire him for breaching his duty of confidentiality (or whatever you call it)!?*

Mr. Fisalis, however, only smiled back calmly at me as alarms went off in my head.

“That’s why I brought you here under the cover of night, and why I’m taking us home that way, too. Not to mention, you don’t know how to get here or where here even is,” he explained.

Are you hinting at something here?

“Oh... I see.” Guess I’ll play along. It’s for my own good.

“I’ve always been allowed to talk about it to a certain extent with family. In terms of what transpired today, I’d probably explain it as: ‘had work at a hard-to-reach location on the edge of town. I’m sorry, but I had to pretend like I was meeting a mistress,’” he continued.

That makes sense.

He was wearing one of his refreshing smiles that said, “I for one think I did a *great job* explaining that” when I looked up at him.

“But, it’s only *a select few* family members you can tell, right?” I decided to pose the question that had been on my mind.

“Yes.”

“Then why is it *me* you’re telling?” I asked with an exasperated sigh. To my surprise, his face suddenly lit up.

“What are you saying? You’re my darling wife! Why wouldn’t I tell you?”

It seemed as if there was no hesitation whatsoever, on his part, to say those sweet words, but more importantly...

“...Aren’t I just your show wife, though?” No sooner had I asked him than he turned me around to face him, took both of my hands in his and looked me straight in the eye. His own dark brown eyes were filled with happiness, as if it had welled up from his smile, but also gleamed with a certain seriousness. The sudden change in him made my heart race.

“I’ve been hoping you would catch on to that for so, so long. I told you the day I broke it off with Callie. You’re what’s best for me. I want us to be a real couple, with no contract involved.”

His words fluttered around in my heart like birds or butterflies. I couldn't hold his gaze. His hands felt so warm. For all the times he had held my hand, or hugged me, or positioned himself well inside my personal bubble up until then, my heart had never beat as hard as it was beating that moment.

Why is it racing so fast!?

"Oh, well, you see..." I somehow managed to squeak out.

"I understand if you're still skeptical of me now that you know what I've been doing this whole time, so I'm going to do everything I can to reassure you. I want to clear up any and all confusion. I'm ready to do whatever it takes to get you to believe me," he said resolutely.

"Even leak classified information?" I asked, somewhat unkindly, as I looked up into his beautiful brown eyes.

"Sure!"

"No, your duty of confidentiality should be your number-one priority!" I jabbed him for replying without even thinking about the consequences. He only snickered at my barb.

"Only telling people I trust is part of that duty, silly."

"Oh, phew, you really surprised me." *Thank goodness he clarified what he meant.*

"That was a close one, Commander! Good job convincing her!" someone said from the doorway leading into the next room. It was the lieutenant commander, Mr. Corydalis, modeling a butler uniform. I hadn't noticed him before, so he must have been in the next room the entire time. The rest of the order came out from behind him. *Judging by their smiling faces, they've all been listening to our conversation on the other side of the door!*

"Let me guess—you all were eavesdropping?" Mr. Fisalis asked, turning an unblinking stare towards Mr. Corydalis.

"Why, whatever do you mean? We weren't eavesdropping; we simply overheard you," Mr. Corydalis replied, casually feigning ignorance as he stared at a point on the wall behind Mr. Fisalis.

“Oh well, I don’t really care if you heard, anyway,” Mr. Fisalis said, his expression returning to its usual composure.

You sure said a lot of mushy, sappy stuff, buddy! I don’t know about you, but it definitely made me blush! Have you no shame!?

—

The knights saw us off with warm smiles when we finally left for home.

“Sorry for making you stay out here so late, and all for my own sake. Do you want to take the carriage back? Or shall we get back on the hor—”

“The carriage, please!” I blurted out before he could finish. *I’m still a little traumatized from the ride, I think.* Besides, I can’t get enough of that gentle rocking motion the carriage makes!

Rohtas had driven the carriage over when he followed us here. He was also our coachman—a real multi-purpose butler! He was happy to drive us back home. Off once more into the night we went.

As it was quite late into the night and I was completely worn out from my very intense, first ever horseback ride, I was no match for the comforting sway of the carriage and dozed off. No sooner had I started quietly sawing logs in time with the swing of the carriage (not that a lady would ever admit to snoring!) than, true to character at this point, I smacked my head on the wall.

Ugh, not more déjà vu. I already promised myself I wouldn’t do this again.

Even still half-asleep, I moaned tearily at the pain in my cranium.

“Are you okay? It’s dangerous to sleep sitting up in a carriage. Here, lean on me,” Mr. Fisalis said, quickly moving from his seat across from me to sit next to me. He gently positioned my head to let me rest against his shoulder. Normally, I’d be bothered by how close he was to me, but at that moment, the sweet allure of sleep was stronger than my instinct to grumble.

“Thank you,” I said, deciding to let him coddle me. Sleep was *my* number-one priority.

As I dozed off again, but this time in the warmth of his arms, I asked him, “Why did you have to go this far just to show me what you do for work?”

“I wanted to do whatever I needed to in order to clear up the misunderstanding.” I could hear his dulcet voice reverberate through his shoulder. He took it upon himself to comb his fingers through my hair, which I graciously allowed, but only because it felt so nice.

“Even so, I don’t think you needed to rush it like this.”

“...Actually, I have to go away on a campaign in a short while.”

I couldn’t hide my small gasp of surprise at his words. A campaign, not a ‘business trip.’ There was a sense of foreboding tucked away in that term. I was yet again blindsided by a sudden turn of events. Needless to say, the clouds of sleep had dispersed from inside my head.

I sat up straighter from where I had been leaning under Mr. Fisalis’ arm and looked at him; his expression was unusually grim.



“A campaign? Not one of your regular business trips?”

“Yeah. This will be a campaign. And a long one, at that.”

“For... how long?”

“At the shortest, one month. Longest... I don’t know. That’s why I couldn’t stand the thought of leaving you with this misunderstanding between us. I wanted to leave without having to worry about what you thought of me, and it all ended up getting rushed.”

Is his work really that critical? I’ve never seen him look so grim. Is this campaign so risky that it warranted leaking information just to clear up a misunderstanding?

A moment of quiet fell over us. Why was it that the sound of my heart thumping was even louder than the click-clacking of the carriage wheels over the road?

Mr. Fisalis smiled at me, trying to console me as I sat in stunned silence.

“You don’t need to look so surprised. Trust me, I swear I’ll come home. Just promise you’ll be waiting on my return,” he told me, using a somber tone I hadn’t heard from him before.

There was little I could do but gaze back into his deep brown eyes.

To be continued

Side Story

I Wish I Could Go Back and Tell Myself I Did Well, But Also Punch Myself

When Viola fell into some sort of depression after she accidentally broke a vase in the entryway, Rohtas and the staff quite intelligently sent her for some rest and relaxation at her parents' home. Even though the vase in question was not one of a kind or even particularly valuable, it seems she felt personally responsible for replacing it. For my part, I was more concerned that she was not injured than I was about reimbursement. I wanted to take care of her the same way she took care of the things she owned.

I wanted to confirm for myself that she was unharmed, but more than that, I did not want to be separated from her for too long, so I traveled to the Euphorbia residence to pick her up. The relaxed atmosphere and familiar surroundings seemed to have done their job, and Viola appeared to be back to her usual self when I arrived. The only thing standing in the way of eagerly taking her home was her brat of a brother.

Her little brother grabbed her hand and whined, "Nooo! Are you going home, Vivi!?" as he started to cry. Seeing this, her little sister latched onto her too.

I wasn't worried too much about her sister, but I knew Viola wouldn't be able to shake off her brother once he got his little claws in her, literally or figuratively. I was certain the little cretin had planned it, as evidenced by the smirk he gave me while clinging to Viola's skirt as she asked if she could stay the night! I wanted so badly to be mad at him, but it turns out I'm a fool for Viola's sapphire blue eyes, and the little cretin had them, too.

I had no choice but to admit defeat.

"...Fine... But please do actually come home tomorrow, then, okay?"

"I will! Thank you!" Viola's smile when I relented was even more lovely than a

freshly bloomed flower. I couldn't take it! I felt my face heat up at the rare sight of her so vulnerable, but the moment my gaze shifted to her brother and his smug little grin, I regained my bearings. *As if I'd let Viola stay here long-term!*

I shook my head and let out a sigh.

"I'll come back for you tomorrow on my way home from work," I told her. I would have been annoyed to have to go pick her up after I got home, changed, and ate, so I'd just do it on the way back.

"Ehh? You don't need to come all the way here just to get me. I can still make it home in time if I walk."

"How could you suggest such a thing!? I'm going to come pick you up, so *please*, just stay right here!" *Not only are you my lovely, dear Viola, but more importantly, you are the lady of the Fisalis house! Not to mention, we'd be all over the front pages if you got kidnapped. Granted, if by chance you are kidnapped, I'm confident that I could take out the guilty party single-handedly. Then again, I doubt the servants would ever let that happen in the first place.*

Anyway.

I'd gotten what I'd come there for—confirmation that Viola was unharmed—so I returned home alone.

The next day, however, I made an unplanned detour back to the manor as a direct result of a subpar message by a certain butler. After a quick change of clothes and equally fast meal, I rushed off to the Euphorbia residence.

This time, I successfully left with my wife in tow, even though it meant refusing an offer to relax and have some tea. What, did you think I was going to give that little imp a second chance to ruin my plans?

Not only was said wife fully recovered, but she was also in happy enough spirits to rush over to me when I arrived. *She never does this at home!* Obviously this action much improved my mood.

In the carriage on the way home:

"Thank you for thinking of repairing my parents' house. I had no idea you'd that, so apologies for the late thank-you. The loan was part of the initial

contract, but I didn't know you'd repair the house, too," Viola said, suddenly sitting up straighter, but then hanging her head once she was done.

Repair the house? The hell is she talking about?

Nothing came to mind right away, and Viola took notice of the confused expression I must have been wearing.

"Mr. Fisalis?"

"Oh, er, sorry."

But then I suddenly remembered something from half a year prior.

"What's the matter?" she asked with one of her adorable head-tilts. *She's too cute for her own good. But it's tearing me apart that I can't be happy with her because I'm not sure what she's talking about.*

I finally managed to pull up something from the back of my mind, however.

House repairs... the Euphorbia family... Ohhh, she must be talking about the order I gave Rohtas. I told him that for totally selfish reasons. It wasn't something she should be impressed by.

Viola frowned, apparently thinking that I couldn't accept her compliment.

"Well, no, I hadn't planned to... How do I put it? It was an easy decision to make when I realized it would make you happy."

"My whole family is very pleased. I can't thank you enough!" It hurt to see how carefree her smile was when I lied to her.

"Oh?" I responded curtly. I had to turn away from her radiant smile, so I looked out my window and said nothing more.

—

It happened not that long after we got married. I had to leave on a business trip as soon as the wedding was over.

I was supposed to marry her six months after we announced our engagement, but I ended up having to embark on a campaign as a result of the deteriorating relationship between the Kingdom of Flür and its southern neighbor, so the wedding was ultimately postponed for an entire year. I thought nothing of Viola

at all back then, so I didn't really care if she had to wait.

I abandoned Viola for almost a year, even though she was my fiancée. As far as her family's debt was concerned, Rohtas looked into it and paid it back in full, but other than that, I was completely out of the picture. The wedding was held once the situation with the neighboring kingdom had settled, but...

"Is there something that can be done about the state of the Euphorbia house?" I had asked Rohtas bitterly when I was informing him of my upcoming business trip.

"The state of it, sir?" Rohtas said back with a raise of an eyebrow.

"Yes. Anyone even walking by on the street could see that it's in shambles," I told him, remembering when I first set foot in the Euphorbia home to negotiate... er, deliver the contra—, I mean, to propose.

The outer walls of the house, made of valuable, once-white stone from the Lebourre region, were unrecognizable: overgrown with moss and crumbling apart. Ivy that had been allowed to grow unchecked wrapped around the house like a net, and the paint on the wooden window frames was even peeling off! It would have been absurd to call the green space I was shown through a garden—it was more like an untended field. The whole place practically screamed 'poor.'

A spotless house, free from even the smallest speck of dust. A carefully maintained exterior that doesn't show its age. Elegant gardens and terraces, diligently grown and looked after by only the best gardener. I'd been raised to think these things were the norm. That's just how it seemed to someone like me—someone with wealth, who lived day-to-day with not a want in the world.

"I agree that they seem to lack sufficient staff, but there's a certain... rustic charm to their home that may be worth appreciating," Rohtas said, clearly holding his tongue. I, for one, couldn't see anything to like about the place.

"I would be terribly ashamed if my parents' manor looked like that for even a second. Arrange for the Euphorbia house to be repaired." It was well-known in social circles that the Euphorbias were poor, but it was disgraceful that they continued to be perceived as such now that they were my relatives.

“What would you have me do?” Rohtas asked, looking for instruction.

“Give them some money and make them fix the place.” Unsurprisingly, my immediate response was to tell him to throw money at the problem. But...

“That would be exceedingly rude, Master,” he objected.

“Why? The reason they haven’t fixed it is because they don’t have any money, right? So just give them some money and the problem is solved. What’s stopping you?”

“That would be inconsiderate. Madam would be hurt if she found out.”

“So?” Regulating Calendula’s temper was my top priority; I didn’t care one way or another if my show wife was happy or not. “Just do something about that house, understood?” I gave Rohtas my final order, not without irritation. I couldn’t understand why he was sparing a thought for Viola.

“...As you wish,” he replied emotionlessly, schooling his expression.

Thus, I ordered Rohtas to tell the Euphorbias to repair their house, and left for my business trip in a rush.

—

“I dispatched Bellis and his men to the Euphorbia residence. I told them to spare no expense.”

This I read in a report from Rohtas, one week later after I returned from my business trip. I knew he was talking about the repairs to the Euphorbia house. I scowled. This was not quite what I’d told him to do.

“They needed labor? The money wasn’t enough?”

“Yes. I thought it would be poor manners to just give them money, so rather than offer financial assistance, I sent something more... personal.”

“Hmph. Fine. How’s progress, then?”

“It’s going to take some time, but the place already looks considerably better. We cannot do much at once, lest we awaken the rumor mill, so we will complete the project just a bit at a time.”

“I see.” *Everything should work out fine so long as Rohtas is at the helm.*

“Will you be going to see it for yourself?”

“Me? To the Euphorbia house? Why would I?”

“It was merely a suggestion.” *If it was just a suggestion, then don’t sigh like that.*

“...Carry on, then.”

“...Understood.”

—

An uncomfortable silence fell over Viola and I in the carriage when she stopped talking, too. I stared absentmindedly through the glass at the house I’d tried so hard to avoid.

Now that I think of it, I haven’t gone anywhere near the Euphorbia house since my proposal. Now that I’ve called on them a second time, and since Viola brought it up, I get the feeling that the house has been completely overhauled. Even though I didn’t get a chance to see much, since I was so focused on her.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that my feelings for her would change this much.

After that point, once I’d refused to go see the progress for myself, Rohtas never said anything more to me about the repairs. It was dusk the next time I went back to pick up Viola, so I couldn’t clearly make out the extent of the renovations. But seeing how pleased she was there in the carriage, I assumed the work on the house had been acceptable.

I wish I could go back and tell myself I did a good job, insofar that I had made Viola happy. Good on you, noticing the sorry state of her parents’ house! She’s never been this happy over anything you’ve done for her before!

But on the other hand, I think I’d also succumb to the urge to give myself a solid thrashing. What was it I had to be ashamed of? What was I thinking, trying to throw money at them? Just offering them cold financial assistance wouldn’t have made Viola happy. And not even just her—it had disrespected her entire family’s sense of pride.

Oh, hell, I was a right bastard back then.

Viola has come around to me now since Rohtas cleverly thought to disguise the financial help as something more personal. It pains me to admit this, but I can't compare to him. Nor to the servants. I can't begin to explain how frustrating it is that Viola's opened up to them but not to me! They have something I don't...

I have always thought of my own interests first. The servants think of Viola's interests first.

...That's it!

I wanted to make the Euphorbias repair their house because it embarrassed me.

Viola and her family think I fixed their home to make it more comfortable for them.

I see now. That notion hadn't even occurred to me.

That's what happened back on our date, too. My own idea of a good time didn't make her happy. But once I asked the servants who knew her well and came to understand her point of view, she really liked what I did with the cottage and the flowers we used to replace the vase.

Oh! I think I'm onto something!

Viola doesn't get anything out of just being showered with money and presents. What she wants is thought and consideration!

My eureka moment pulled me out of my thoughts and back into reality. I looked at Viola, sitting across from me.

...She's sound asleep. What gives?

Her head rolled to and fro with the movement of the carriage as she slept in silence. I thought it a shame that she was asleep, since we could be talking if she wasn't, but I figured letting her guard down enough to take a nap in front of me was real progress.

Besides, I get to see what she looks like asleep again! Mimosa would tattle on me to Rohtas if she saw... but she's not here now, is she?

If anything, compared to when Viola was awake and alert, she looked much

more innocent and defenseless, as one would expect someone her age to be, when she was asleep.

Argh, how could I impose such cruel circumstances on a girl like her! I would for sure punch myself if I could go back in time.

Even a fiend like me has limits, I thought to myself.

It's impossible to go back and punch myself, so my only choice is to repent for my past crimes and move ahead. I won't make the same mistake twice! Making mistakes is to invite defeat, so... no, wait, this isn't work. Oh well, at least I figured things out.

As I watched Viola asleep across from me, the carriage suddenly lurched and before I could even react, she hit her head on the wall. She woke up from the pain and groaned, sleepily rubbing at the spot that had made contact with the wall.

The series of events was so endearing that I couldn't hold back my laughter.

"What did you... *pffft!*...do?"

She still looked a bit drowsy, but had the presence of mind to realize she'd done something embarrassing and turned red.

"Ngh, I just got a little sleepy. Sorry," she apologized.

Why does she think she needs to apologize? Granted, it was really, really cute from my end.

"No need to apologize. More importantly, is your head alright? No lump or anything?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. We'll be there soon. Everyone's eager to see you home, so please don't give them the impression you have a concussion."

"Okay," she smiled softly. *It's impossible for me to feel sad when she smiles at me like that.*

Viola's warm and welcoming aura seemed to cure my negativity.

I want to feel like this all the time. I want to do a better job of considering her

feelings just so I can see her smile, I thought.



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Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?! Volume 2

by Tsuredurebana

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